'Le Moyen de lire eux-mêmes': Self-understanding and the Aesthetic Experience of reading in Proust's A la Recherche du temps perdu

Orhanen, Anna

Awarding institution:
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Author: Anna Orhanen

‘Le Moyen de lire en eux-mêmes’ –
Self-understanding and the Aesthetic Experience of Reading in Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu*

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of King’s College London by Anna Orhanen
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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the aesthetic experience of reading in Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu,* with a special emphasis on the Narrator's proposition that a literary work may enable its readers to become 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610). This view prompts two crucial questions about self-understanding through reading: (i) what is meant by 'self' and (ii) what makes the process of reading literature special, as opposed to other aesthetic experiences and the reading of other kinds of texts.

The first part of the thesis focuses on subjectivity and the relation between primary experience and mediation in Proust, addressing the underlying tension between two views of selfhood in the *Recherche* – a self which evolves around some kind of essence at the centre of experience, and a much more fragmented subject which needs to be constantly recomposed. Rather than being an exclusively metaphysical enquiry into how subjectivity is presented in the novel, this study focuses, though close analysis of Proust's text, on the ways in which this potential self-understanding can be attained through literature; the second part therefore compares reading to other aesthetic experiences – those of visual art, music and performance – while the third and final part focuses specifically on literature's communicative possibilities and the different modes of reading in the novel.

The thesis argues that the specificity of aesthetic reading is attached to the absence (or at least subsidiary role) of material, sensory stimuli from the artwork itself, which compels readers' imagination to work closely with (and largely depend on) their past and present experiences outside the text at hand. This collaboration is the germ of the Proustian 'moyen de lire en soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) as it enables the reader to overcome the separation between the actual, direct, affective experience *in* the world and the mediated, reflective experience *of* the world, and to realise the in-dwelling and reciprocal affiliation between the two.

ABBREVIATIONS

RTP I *= A la Recherche du temps perdu I (Du côté de chez Swann; A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs I)*

RTP II *= A la Recherche du temps perdu II* ***(****A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs II; Le Côté de Guermantes I, II)*

RTP III = *A la Recherche du temps perdu III* ***(****Sodome et Gomorrhe I, II; La Prisonnière)*

RTP IV *= A la Recherche du temps perdu III (Albertine disparue; Le Temps retrouvé)*

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Very special and heartfelt thanks go to my father FM Pentti Orhanen who first introduced me to Proust in 2000 and set me on a lifelong journey with the *Recherche.* I am immensely grateful also to the rest of my family and my friends and colleagues in London, Finland and Paris for their unwavering support throughout my project.

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INTRODUCTION

'Longtemps' – that is how it all starts, with a word describing an undefined, long-lasting stretch of time, followed by the clause 'je me suis couché de bonne heure' (*RTP I,* 3). The somewhat strange syntax of the opening sentence in Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* chains together several singular completed actions in the past (to which the *passé composé* tense usually refers) into a habitual, somewhat indistinguishable continuous process.[1] Proust's Narrator goes on to describe the habit of falling asleep reading a book and the peculiar feeling of not quite knowing who he is when he wakes up ('Je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j'étais.' (*RTP I,* 5)). The opening scene thus throws the reader of the *Recherche* right into the deep end of the Proustian project of understanding the self and introduces, on the very first pages of the book, three aspects which are crucial to the present study: the role of 'unmarked' everyday experiences, reading, and self-awareness.

In this thesis I examine the aesthetic experience of reading in Proust's *Recherche,* with a special emphasis on the Narrator's suggestion that a book may enable the readers to become 'les propres lecteurs d' eux-mêmes' and to 'lire en eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610). This proposition prompts three crucial questions about the possibility of self-understanding through reading: (i) What kind of notion of selfhood does the *Recherche* imply? (ii) How does the literary experience differ from other aesthetic experiences? and (iii) What makes a reading experience 'literary' and 'aesthetic' and different from everyday communication (written and spoken)?

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[1] The opening sentence of the *Recherche* has been analysed probably most famously by Roland Barthes in *Le Bruissement de la langue,* Essais Critiques IV (Paris: Seuil, 1994), pp. 313-25.

My approach to these questions is based on an understanding of 'self' as an entity which is *au fond* continuous, unified, substantial and at least potentially accessible to knowledge. Relying on philosophical hermeneutics, which finds its origins in Husserlian theories of ontology and was further developed in the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer, I align with the view that there is no consciousness without being the consciousness *of* something. I argue that the specificity of literary experience is partly related to the absence – or at least subsidiary role – of material, sensory stimuli from the artwork itself which compels readers' imagination to work closely with (and largely depend on) their past and present experiences in the world which they inhabit as psycho-physical entities. This collaboration between the imagined and the lived experience, revealing the affinities (as well as differences) between the other and the self, the art-object and the reader-subject, sits at the very centre of the Proustian 'façon de bien lire' (*RTP IV,* 490), as it enables the reader to overcome the (artificial) separation between the actual, direct, affective experience *in* the world and the mediated, reflective experience *of* the world.

Proustian subjectivity and the role of art in its formation and sustenance have been the focus of a range of studies on Proust's novel. As Anne Simon notes, 'the different modelizations of [the] *Recherche*, which at the same time allow Proust to be a formalist, a spider stuck in a world of rhizomes, or on the contrary, with Jean-Pierre Richard, George Poulet or Gaëtan Picon, a phenomenologist in tune with the physical world and referentiality, show just how much the novel is characterised by an extremely broad hermeneutic potential.'[2] The aim of this study is not to introduce another 'theory of reading' based on the *Recherche* but rather to discuss the experience of reading through viewpoints which embrace exactly this hermeneutic potential – that is, by emphasising the phenomenological congruity between the reading experience and 'life experience'.

I suggest this congruity or collaboration reaches far beyond merely sympathising with the characters of a book or finding some conspicuous parallels between the story of the book and the reader's own life. The reading experience, like any 'direct' life experience,

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[2] Anne Simon, 'The Formalist, the Spider, and the Phenomenologist' in André Benhaïm (ed.) *The Strange M. Proust* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2009), pp. 23-35. The phenomenologically centred studies Simon refers to here are Jean-Pierre Richard's *Proust et le monde sensible* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), Georges Poulet's *L'Espace proustien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), and Gaëtan Picon's *Lecture de Proust* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

is also always distinctive on the basis of sensuous and emotional states that we go through during the act of reading – states which may often remain 'unmarked' for the time being but can resurface and be 're-experienced' in retrospect. These kinds of sensuous and emotional dimensions are absolutely crucial in the working of our imagination and, together with those life experiences of which we are more fully aware, they form a foundation for experiencing the new and the unfamiliar; in this sense, the experience of a book is never 'abstracted' from our everyday life. I do not consider this foundation as functioning merely on the basic level of 'horizon of expectations' – a term introduced in reader-response theories – but instead, in line with Gadamerian hermeneutics, as something more intrinsic, more fundamental, and less abstract: familiarity which gives rise to certain kinds of instincts (or, in Gadamer's terms 'prejudices'[3]) which guide the reading experience in the same way that they guide the experience of 'being oneself'.

While I acknowledge the importance of reader-response theories in having drawn attention to the reading process in the history of literary criticism, in this study I will not use uniformist reader-response theories, such as Wolfgang Iser's, as a part of my critical framework.[4] Although these theories examine the process of reading very closely, the focus is often still very much on the text – how a text makes people read and how it may or may not be affected in the reading process. As my project is concerned with the reader's selfhood, I re-focalise the question related to the relationship between the reader and the text and concentrate on the possible ways in which the aesthetic experience of reading may enhance the reader's self-understanding. The aspects of the reading experience I emphasise below require the reader to be understood as a psychophysical entity in the world; thus the 'implied reader' of the uniformist reader-response theories seems too abstract to be employed in this analysis.

Literature's communicative potential has been in the focus of various studies of Proust's novel – those by Philip Bailey, Martha Nussbaum and Roger Shattuck, to name but a

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[3] Gadamer uses the term 'prejudice' in the original non-negative sense of the word, referring simply to 'conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us'. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1976), p. 9.

[4] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

few.[5] Much of the discussion around the meta-fictional dimension of Proust's novel has focused on the writer's relation to the work of art, his readership and himself through his work; for example David Ellison offers an insightful discussion of the self-creative elements and communication with the self through autobiographical writing.[6] While the possibilities of redemption and self-understanding through art in Proust's novel have been widely studied in the context of the Narrator's artistic creation and his 'growth' into a writer, the role of the reader has received far less critical interest until quite recently. Earlier, for example Roland Barthes in his *Plaisir du texte* has examined the effects of reading of the *Recherche* itself, whilst paying less attention to the experience of how the reading experience is actually described *in* the novel.[7] Paul de Man's 'Reading (Proust)' in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust,* in contrast, approaches the reading experience in and of the *Recherche* through predominantly textually oriented analysis, with quite radically deconstructionist outcomes.[8]

In 2009, around the time when I began my PhD project, the considerable emphasis that the *Recherche* places on reading and the experience of the reader within the novel was brought into the limelight in two studies on reading in Proust: the wonderful *Reading in Proust's A la Recherche: 'le délire de la lecture'* by Adam Watt and *The Syllables of Time: Proust and the History of Reading* by Teresa Whitington.[9] Particularly Watt's study and his linking of reading and involuntary memory as well as his discussion of the sensuous dimension of reading have functioned as a valuable source of inspiration in writing this thesis. In his book, Watt concentrates on 'acts of textual interpretation' in

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[5] Philip Bailey, *Proust's Self-Reader: The Pursuit of Literature as Privileged Communication* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1997); Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Way: A Field Guide to in Search of Lost Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

[6] David Ellison, *The Reading of Proust* (US: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 138-42.

[7] Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

[8] By 'textually-oriented' I refer to the critical approach which prioritises textual elements in the reading process. Paul de Man, 'Reading (Proust)' in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 57-78. I shall discuss de Man's approach in more detail towards the end of this introduction, in relation to my views on the Proustian reading experience.

[9] Adam Watt, *Reading in Proust's A la Recherche: 'le délire de la lecture'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Teresa Whitington, *The Syllables of Time: Proust and the History of Reading* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2009).

the *Recherche* through close analysis of an impressive number of examples of scenes of reading in the novel, viewing the act of reading as epistemic enterprise which 'permits – and indeed increases – acute analytical thinking and sensory receptiveness to the phenomenal world around the reader', while also examining closely the notion of 'délire' – the errors and 'readerly delirium' that any reader is subject to in the act of reading.[10]

Watt's study thus fully acknowledges and draws attention to a certain kind of paradoxicality in the Proustian reading experience, which is epistemically driven but may also be fallacious in its attempt to reconcile the inner and the outer world of the reader. Watt calls this situation 'the dilemma of the reader' and explores 'the duality of corporeal and intellectual experience in reading' in insightful analyses of the reading scenes in Proust – particularly of the passage in *Combray* in which the Narrator's reads in the garden.[11]

While my research fundamentally revolves around the same paradox, I approach and consider the experience of reading primarily from the viewpoint of its capacity to enhance the reader's *self*-understanding, with a special interest in the notion of Proustian subjectivity. For me, the starting point in exploring the nature of the reading experience is to ask how the reader can become 'le propre lecteur de soi-même' through someone else and enhance his or her perception of the world and of his or her own self by initially moving away from the self. While both Watt's and Whitington's studies explore reading of different kinds of texts (such as letters, telegrams, newspapers etc. in addition to literature) as well as reading in the metaphorical sense, I focus on a specific kind of reading experience which I call 'aesthetic' reading and which, in Proust, is mostly presented through the reading of literary texts.[12] In order to assess more fully the writer-Narrator's proposition that reading literature can be particularly 'self-revelatory' experience, in Part Two of this study I also explore other aesthetic experiences in the novel (those of paintings, music and performance) comparatively to that of reading.

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[10] Watt, see e.g. pp. 9, 13, 15.

[11] See Watt, pp. 31-38.

[12] Further discussion of the term 'literary' will follow in Chapter Two.

Another important aspect of this study is distinguishing between conceptual, nominal self-knowledge and self-understanding. While I regard the self as something which is at least potentially accessible to knowledge, I prefer the term 'self-understanding' because of the somewhat persistent connotations of objectification and totality that the notion 'self-knowledge' carries. Furthermore, while this study is also concerned with certain phenomena of 'heightened' consciousness that seem to be achievable through reading, I consider these states always together with those elements in the reading process of which the reader is *not* actively 'aware', arguing that these 'unmarked' experiences play a crucial role in the self-revelatory potential of the experience. It is worth pointing out here that in this study the role of these latent or semi-conscious elements in the reading experience will be discussed primarily through hermeneutic and phenomenological perspectives rather than through psychoanalysis. The application of psychoanalytical criticism to Proust's novel has already produced a range of in-depth studies, including Malcolm Bowie's groundbreaking *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* and Julia Kristeva's *Le Temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire*.[13]

Edward Hughes's study *Marcel Proust: A Study in the Quality of Awareness* examines multiple forms of consciousness as well as the nature of perception and feeling that Proust's work presents, mainly through the Narrator of the *Recherche* but also through Proust's earlier works *Jean Santeuil* and *Les Plaisirs et les jours* and Proust's *Cahiers*. Hughes follows, through various carefully-chosen examples, the Narrator's philosophical, social and aesthetic development – how he moves from his adolescent, somewhat exaggerated adoration of 'intellectuals', artists and philosophers (and the disappointments to which these idealised conceptions lead) to acknowledging the

[13] Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 67-98; Julia Kristeva, *Le Temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), e.g. pp. 20-36 ('La lecture de Sand'), pp. 281-86 ('Perception et conscience selon Freud: difficultés de l'identité et de la différence'), p. 368 ("l'association libre" and time). Also Adam Watt occasionally discusses the Narrator's relationship through psychoanalytical terms, for example in analysing the mother's reading of *François le Champi* in *Combray* as a 'primal scene of reading' and viewing Bergotte as a kind of 'père perdu' of the Narrator. See Watt, pp. 25-27, 50, 80. Mary Jacobus's *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) offers an insightful psychoanalytical investigation into the effects of the reading experience in general.

triumph of 'véritable' sense-impressions over intellectualism in art later on in the novel.[14]

The idea that our consciousness can be expanded by a *literary* experience in particular has also been explored by E.F.N. Jephcott in his study *Proust and Rilke: the Literature of Expanded Consciousness.* Jephcott calls these kinds of experiences of heightened consciousness 'privileged moments' – experiences in which 'both the quality and the structure of awareness are changed'.[15] According to Jephcott, 'the qualitative change involves a heightening of sensations and of the apparent meaning they convey' while 'the structural change involves a unification of all parts of awareness to form a total system'; this system, then, allows our consciousness to operate free from 'all the conditions and limitations of ordinary life' and leads into disappearance of subject-object divisions between the one who experiences and the world.[16]

When the reader reads 'aesthetically', the 'conditions and limitations of ordinary life' indeed seem to temporarily disappear, but in this study I argue that this freedom from the 'everyday experience' is, in fact, illusory. Contrarily to Jephcott, I suggest that the disappearance of the subject-object division and the self-revelatory potential of the reading process is produced by the congruity of the ordinary (often mundane) everyday experience and the mediated experience rather than by some kind of escapism (or liberation) from the 'lived' experience. A 'privileged moment' therefore, even if it can give us the sense of extra-temporality and universality, cannot merely be produced by the text but indeed, as Proust's Narrator suggests, by descending 'plus profondément *en moi*' (*RTP IV,* 624).

Jephcott furthermore argues that these changes in our awareness during the privileged moments lead to 'disappearance of the separate individuality' since 'this climactic

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[14] Edward J. Hughes, *Marcel Proust: A Study in the Quality of Awareness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 66 (see pp. 62-68 and elsewhere). In his study, Hughes also analyses several other characters in the novel – Françoise, the grandmother and Albertine in particular – showing how the Narrator's interaction with them changes, expands and distorts his perception of the world around him as well as his 'interior' universe and his perception of himself. (See Hughes, pp. 69-73, 77-84 and 132-159.)

[15] E.F.N. Jephcott, *Proust and Rilke: the Literature of Expanded Consciousness* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), p. 29.

[16] Jephcott, p. 28.

moment, however widely individual descriptions of it may vary, is in all cases, in terms of the changed awareness of time, space and individuality, essentially the same experience.'[17] Through close analysis of passages dealing with reading, the memories of reading, and the concept of 'la réalité' in the *Recherche,* I argue that instead of leading to the disappearance of the sense of the self, these moments of recognising the analogies or continuities of sensations in the past and the present do exactly the opposite: they point to the reader-subject's *unique* way of 'appropriating' his or her experiences.

The feeling of exhilaration one may experience at these moments of 'heightened consciousness' can therefore just as well be considered as a proof of individuality and of a sense of unique existence. The fact that we are able to mark these analogies in the first place shows that there must be something essentially shared between the subject who experiences now and in the past. This does not of course mean that the ideas and sensations that reading evokes cannot *also* be shared between different readers or between the reader and the writer (and in this sense, considered as potentially universal). However, the Proustian process of reading 'en soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) is an inherently individualised one in so far that it cannot happen, as we shall see in the coming chapters, without the interaction between the text and the reader's own unique sphere of experience – the transitory emotive and sensuous universe through which the reader travels in time.

Rather than being an exclusively metaphysical enquiry into how subjectivity is presented in the *Recherche*, this study focuses, through close analysis of Proust's text, on the ways in which potential self-understanding can be obtained through the aesthetic experience. Part one of the thesis comprises the introduction to the theoretical framework I use and examines some underpinning issues related to the question of coherent selfhood that in Western philosophy arise particularly after the Cartesian separation between the cognitive 'subject' and the object-like body. Rather than approaching the processes of self-understanding and self-creation through a strictly psychological angle, my approach will be more epistemologically and ontologically oriented, with a special emphasis on the role of art, and the relation between immediate experience 'in-the-world' and mediated experience, especially that of a literary text.

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[17] Jephcott, pp. 28-9.

One way to approach the term 'literary' and the nature of literary reading experiences is to ask what is 'other' to literature. In the present study, I consider the phenomenon of literature by discussing it in relation to philosophy, other art forms, as well as everyday communication in the context of Proust's novel. As the principal concern of this study is to examine the experience of reading in Proust's novel and the implications of this process for the reader-subject, we must start by considering what kind of notion of selfhood is implied in Proust's novel: who or what is the 'soi-même' the Narrator refers to when he suggests that a book may enable its readers to 'lire en eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610)?

In chapter one I introduce the general critical framework within which my study will explore selfhood, the relationship between 'primary' immediate experience and its mediation, and the nature of 'la réalité' within Proust's novel. I discuss the development of the modernist subject prominently through theories of Descartes, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Gadamer, with a special emphasis on the role of aesthetic experience in the process of self-understanding. Chapter Two focuses on the philosophical implications of Proust's novel and, more generally, the relation between truth and fiction, as well as the relationship between writing and reading, the writer and his audience. I approach this relationship through R.G. Collingwood's theory which, especially in its emphasis on the active role of the reader, is in many ways analogous with the views that Proust's Narrator expresses in *Le Temps retrouvé*.[18]

In order to explore the nature of the Proustian aesthetic reading experience more comprehensively, we need to also consider the ways in which other art forms, such as visual art and music, are experienced in Proust's novel; these comparisons will be carried out in Part Two of this study. Chapter Three focuses on the experience of paintings and examines the impact of visual art on the Narrator's perception (both visual and psychological) of the world around him. Especially Elstir's impressionist works, which provoke deep admiration in the Narrator, play a significant role in revealing to him the significance of sense-impressions in art. However, while visual artworks seem

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[18] For example, Collingwood remarks that the artist 'must prophesy not in the sense that he tells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts'. Robin George Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 336.

to affect the onlooker's perception, they also always seem to position the viewer *outside* the artwork and therefore forever represent the vision of the 'other'. At the end of Chapter Three, I discuss this 'otherness' aspect in the reception of visual art through painting-related imagery in the novel presented, for example in the Bois de Boulogne episode – the chronological interval in *Du Côté de chez Swann* – in which the Narrator discusses 'la contradiction que c'est de chercher dans la réalité les tableaux de la mémoire, auxquels manquerait toujours le charme qui leur vient de la mémoire même et de n'être pas perçus par les sens' (*RTP I,* 414).

In Chapter Four I consider the experience of music and the performing arts, paying special attention to the presence/ absence of language in the appropriation of the artwork. In Peter Kivy's words, music can be considered as concept-laden but '[these] concepts are not expressive of semantic or representational properties'.[19] Thus the aesthetic properties of a musical piece cannot be analysed on the basis of their content or 'representational' qualities in the way that for example representational paintings can; it seems, rather, that referentiality and meaningfulness in the experience of music happens through a more gradual process in which the role of time, repetition and memory are heightened.

The experience of dramatic art, which also features in the *Recherche,* shares some features of music and literature alike, having a textual as well as a performative dimension. The coexistence of multiple interpretations (by the actors on the stage and the spectator) as well as a specific spatio-temporal context make the experience of drama distinctly different from what might be described as a freer and more independent experience of reading the text. The *Recherche* offers an example of the clash between these two experiences, which originates in the spectator having appropriated the play through reading before seeing it performed on stage: La Berma's performance of Racine's *Phèdre,* fervently anticipated by the adolescent Narrator, eventually renders him bitterly disappointed. I discuss this incident at the end of Chapter Four and suggest this discordance can partly be explained through the

[19] Peter Kivy, *Music, Language, and Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 225.

proposition that language is performative *in itself*.[20] The 'recipient' is never merely a recipient when there is language involved – he or she is always also an interpreter and a (re)creator.[21]

This suggestion leads us back to consider the Proustian proposition of reading 'en soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) which will be the focus of the third and the final part of the thesis. In the last two chapters I discuss the experience of reading in the *Recherche* and return to the questions presented in Part One about subjectivity and the relationship between direct and mediated experience. It is worth pointing out here that the thesis will not concern itself with questions of literary *value,* that is, the evaluative basis on which some texts may be considered as aesthetically and literally more valuable than others; rather, I consider the 'literariness' of texts through the mode/s of reading that the reader employs. I focus on the ways in which the text becomes meaningful for the reader, rather than on some evaluative act performer by the reader, based on the quality or the features of the text.

Chapter Five focuses explicitly on literature's communicative possibilities and the different modes of reading in the *Recherche.* Through analysing different readers within the *Recherche* – including the Narrator's mother and grandmother reading Mme de Sévigné; Jupien using literary references in his 'code-language'; the young valet in the Narrator's apartment with a zeal to quote from literary works; and, finally, the Narrator himself – I propose that it is the *mode* of reading rather than necessarily the style or the contents of the text itself which ultimately makes the reading experience aesthetic and potentially 'self-revelatory'.

In Chapter Six I explore the notion of 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' and, through discussing the role of the senses, memory and '[la] notion du temps incorporé' (*RTP IV,* 623) in the reading process, I consider the parallels between the process of reading 'en

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[20] Peter Kivy proposes that a certain kind of fictional reading can, due to its creative dimension, be considered as a form of art, or at least as artistic performance in his book *The Performance of Reading: an Essay in the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 29 (passim).

[21] A note on the words 'reception' and 'recipient' in this study: I generally prefer to talk about readers, viewers and listeners to emphasise the *active role* of the one who experiences – and not only active in the process of understanding and interpreting the artwork but, indeed, in understanding and interpreting their own selves in the process. Aesthetic experience in the present study is considered as a creative process in its own right – as Sartre puts it, 'le synthèse de la perception et la création'. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* in *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 92.

soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) and the Proustian process of 'becoming oneself', which will be discussed through close analysis of the opening scene of the novel. I ask whether the aesthetic experience in Proust is presented as a trans-subjective state or whether it is, in fact, something which revives, reassures and advocates if not an entirely coherent then at least a unified selfhood for the reader-subject.

One of the most radical deconstructionist readings of the *Recherche* is presented in Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading.* According to de Man, Proust's novel, through its imagery, 'aims at the most demanding of reconciliations, that of motion and stasis', and an attempt at this kind of reconciliation is also immanent in the Narrator, between his inner landscape and what is happening 'outside' in the world. De Man argues that this reconciliation only becomes possible through imagination and specific rhetorical devices of language, such as metaphor and metonymy, and that without these devices – without the creative interference of language – the outside world (as well as our sensuous experiences of it) are considered as something which is bound to repeatedly disappoint us and leave us with mere fragmented experience of our existence.[22] However, de Man goes on to remark how not even imaginative use of language can fully reconcile the eternal contradiction the Narrator feels between his inner and the external world. As the metaphor always includes an element of impossibility, the very contradiction remains embodied and manifested in it; this leads de Man to suggest that Proust's text can in fact be viewed as 'an allegorical narrative of its own deconstruction'.[23]

While I acknowledge the significance of powerful figurative language and metaphor in a novel such as Proust's (and indeed, in the Narrator's own 'theory' of the relationship between 'la réalité' and its representation[24]), my primary angle to self-understanding through literary texts is the experience of the reader. What I propose in this study is, contrary to de Man, that in an aesthetic reading experience the power to 'reconcile' is never a property of a text alone but in fact only ever becomes available within a

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[22] de Man, pp. 68-72.

[23] de Man, p. 72.

[24] 'Ce que nous appelons la réalité est un certain rapport entre ces sensations et les souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément [...]. rapport unique que l'écrivain doit retrouver pour en enchaîner à jamais [...] dans une métaphore' (*RTP IV,* 468).

complex and highly subjective process in which the reader recognises the affinity between 'lived' and 'mediated' experience. Both reading and 'being oneself' involve engagement in a constant process which is both self-reflexive and self-reflective at the same time; the attempt to comprehend the self as some kind of fixed entity which can be objectively grasped would therefore only produce the same kind of ostensible knowledge as talking about a book as an art-object. True self-understanding requires constant involvement in a complex process of *becoming*, in the same way that a book can only truly become meaningful through the reading process.

A text that shows how contradictory elements can co-exist harmoniously may alleviate the perpetual striving for immediate access to knowledge and 'truth' which Heidegger refers to as 'the metaphysics of presence'.[25] In other words, reading a text may reveal to us the phenomenological continuity of Being, the inseparability of past and present within us, because when we read, the possible 'reconciliation' does not happen through imagination or intellect alone but also always rises from the reader's own past lived experiences in-the-world – including previously unmarked experiences (such as sensuous experiences) that play a crucial role in the way our memory works. The Narrator's remark as to how 'les idées sont des succédanés des chagrins' (*RTP IV,* 485) for instance emphasises the processual relationship between the lived experiences and their reflection – that is, how 'direct' experiences transcend into ideas and lay foundations for our subsequent experience. However, ideas are 'succédanés [de chagrin] dans *l'ordre du temps* seulement' (*RTP IV,* 485, my emphasis). Thus, it seems that this process of making experiences 'timeless' itself requires time, as well as new experiences which make us see the past in a new light.

Thus, the notion of selfhood presented in Proust's novel seems not to be that of the self as an essence that simply fixedly 'is there' to be objectively grasped and represented, since a self understood in those terms would necessarily be ultimately attached to a specific moment in time. Rather, this 'real' essence can only truly be understood as what unifies the experiences of the subject across time, and therefore it can only be accessed through an on-going process that binds representation and direct experience together. As

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[25] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, [1962] 1993), pp. 43-50 and elsewhere.

Paul Crowther puts it, ‘our fundamental cognition of the world is not purely ‘mental’ [but] a function of all our sensory, motor, and affective capacities operating as a unified field.’[26] This ‘bodily’ dimension and its significance to self-understanding are dramatically manifested in the relatively short passages describing the paralysis and death of the Narrator’s grandmother, which I discuss at the end of my study.

[26] Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 103.

PART I

SELF, SUBJECTIVITY AND LITERATURE

We make the world our own, with words
and our pointing fingers, perhaps by the pieces
frailest and most dangerous to us. [...]

See, now together we must bear,
as if the whole, these fragments and parts.

– Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Sonnet XVI' in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*[1]

[1] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Susan Ranson and Marielle Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 199.

1. Selfhood, Mediation and the Primacy of Experience

In *Albertine disparue,* the Narrator, who is trying to come to terms with the fact that Albertine has left him, breaks into tears at the sight of the barber who has come to cut his hair. This happens simply because he has forgotten about 'le "moi" que j'étais quand je me faisais couper les cheveux' (*RTP IV,* 14) – one of his multiple selves who has not yet been informed about Albertine's departure. The Narrator takes certain precautions to keep any memories of Albertine at bay – for example by seating himself on one of the blue satin armchairs on which he never used to sit before, in order to avoid the sight of her pianola – but all these attempts are in vain:

> Hélas! je ne m'y étais jamais assis, avant cette minute, que quand Albertine était encore là. Aussi je ne pus y rester, je me levai; et ainsi à chaque instant il y avait quelqu'un des innombrables et humbles 'moi' qui nous composent qui était ignorant encore du départ d'Albertine et à qui il fallait le notifier; il fallait [...] annoncer le malheur qui venait d'arriver à tous ces êtres, à tous ces 'moi' qui ne le savaient pas encore; il fallait que chacun d'eux à son tour entendît pour la première fois ces mots: 'Albertine a demandé ses malles' – ces malles en forme de cercueil que j'avais vu charger à Balbec à côté de celles de ma mère, – 'Albertine est partie'.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 14

The Narrator seems to be facing here a certain lack of cohesion between his past experiences – habitual, repeated experiences like getting a haircut – and the newly acquired fact that Albertine is gone. What seems to be suggested here is that the past is not *automatically* affected by the present; the different selves that have not yet been touched by Albertine's departure seem to rebel against it by cropping up in different contexts, renewing and intensifying the Narrator's distress.

Out of this situation arises a range of questions concerning Proustian subjectivity, the sense of self, memory, knowledge, reality, and the way we appropriate our experiences. The passage prompts us to consider, first of all, the way in which the subject here is

presented as a composition of multiple selves at different points in time, and the need that arises from this multiplicity for communication with one's own self. It also opens up several questions concerning the relationship between primary experience and mediation, such as whether we ultimately always need some kind of mediation to make our experiences *our* experiences. It is with these questions in mind that I begin to survey the landscape of the Proustian subject in this chapter.

In its presentation of selfhood, Proust's novel seems to linger somewhere between essentialism and a prefiguring of the postmodern dissolution of the subject. The Narrator's multiple selves are not called forth by reminiscing, by conscious thought, but by unexpected emotive and sensuous impressions evoked by objects and bodily experiences (the sight of Albertine's pianola, getting a haircut). While the painful task of mediating the news of Albertine's departure to the previous selves seems never-ending, these different selves do not seem to exist in total isolation from one another; at the very least, they inhabit the same body whose experiences serve as evocation of the past within the present. The way in which the conscious, rational mind here, as on so many other occasions in the *Recherche,* is challenged by the primary experience and (involuntary) memory manifests in its own right Proust's detachment from the Cartesian division between the object-like body that senses and the cognitive mind as the 'subject' that *governs* the experience 'par la pensée'.[1]

The urge to communicate with one's own self is manifested in a somewhat more positive light than in the above example in the context of the Narrator's 'moments bienheureux' which, in turn, signal a strong sense of *continuity* between the different selves. However, even though these instances of involuntary memory seem to produce a blissful sense of disclosure, this 'redeeming' quality seems to always remain fugitive because the Narrator, during these moments, never quite seems to arrive at explanation of these experiences. The 'moments bienheureux' thus show that while mediation 'par la pensée' alone seems to remain infertile as far as encompassing 'reality' is concerned, the mere primary sensuous experiences without mediation, are only capable of

[1] René Descartes, *Méditations* in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge: Dover, 1955), p. 157.

producing an intermittent sense of continuity to which we cannot hold on. The situation prompts us to ask, then, are there means to overcome this intermittency?

An answer to this question strongly suggested in Proust's novel points us in the direction of art. Aesthetic experiences are one domain of experience which in Proust is celebrated for its capacity to unite the cognitive and sensuous faculties and blur the boundaries between mediation and immediate experience. Precisely due to these qualities, aesthetic experiences seem to hold a specific potential to create a sense of unity in the subject who experiences, and examples of such 'unifying' moments will be discussed in the coming chapters in the context of visual art, music, performance and, particularly, the reading of literature.

The role of art in life has been the object of philosophical investigation since Plato, and the significance of aesthetic experience in the formation of selfhood took a particularly central role in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with Romanticism and German Idealism. The discussion of art and selfhood in the philosophies of Schelling, Schlegel, Schopenhauer, and later in Nietzsche, all of whom foreground the significance of aesthetic experience as an essential part of self-formation and one of the most prominent manifestations of individual subjectivity, has left a distinctive mark on many subsequent views on selfhood, such as psychoanalytical theories.[2] The discovery and creation of one's own self via aesthetic routes is also prominently present in existentialism, starting with Søren Kierkegaard (who despite his theological background and emphasis writes very adroitly on the loss of coherence and exterior authority affecting the Modernist subject), and continuing strongly in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

Existentialist aesthetics emphasises especially the ways in which experiences of art allow the subject to realise how fine the lines between what he *knows* of the world and how he *imagines* it (or indeed, 'chooses' it) actually are. I shall explore this aspect of self-formation in section 1.3 below by analysing the ways in which some of the characters in Proust seem to use aesthetic experiences to shape their outward

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[2] Stephen Barker, *Autoaesthetics: Strategies of the Self after Nietzsche* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Humanities Press, 1992), pp. 170-4. Also Romantic artists such as Wordsworth took great interest in the combination of sensuous experience of the world and imagination in the formation of selfhood.

portraiture; there seems to be a difference between this kind of deliberate self-fashioning and a more open-ended process of self-creation that draws from the aesthetic experience by allowing it to kindle the powers of memory and imagination.

To situate Proust's project in his contemporary context, it was exactly this kind of fragmentation of experience within the self that is depicted in the passage above which was one of the main concerns of Modernist literature. As Charles Taylor remarks:

> [The] turn inward [in Modernism], to experience or subjectivity, did not mean a turn to a self to be articulated, where this is understood as an alignment of nature and reason, or instinct and creative power. On the contrary, the turn inward may take us beyond the self as usually understood, to a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question … or beyond that to a new kind of unity, a new way of inhabiting time, as we see, for instance, with Proust.[3]

The crucial importance of this new kind of presentation of selfhood, then, was to show that subjectivity should not be regarded as just something which simply 'is there' to be represented but how representation always is an integral part of subjectivity. This suggested 'new kind of unity, a new way of inhabiting time' in Proust seems to happen (at least partly) by dispelling the Cartesian separation between the immediate experiences of the object-like body and the mind that mediates, and considering, instead, mediation as a part of the experience itself.

1.1. Selfhood: from *Cogito* to Self-understanding

Despite the indisputably significant role that mediation plays in the *Recherche*, the possibility of self-understanding that the novel implies is based on something other than the logic of the Cartesian 'cogito': instead of extracting knowledge of one's experience by thinking, the Proustian process emphasises the inseparability of the experience and its mediation, and how the sense of understanding oneself (indeed rather than 'knowing' oneself) is attached to a realisation of the affinity between the two.

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[3] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 462.

As Taylor notes, in Cartesian philosophy, 'we have to *objectify* the world, including our own bodies, and that means to come to see them mechanistically and functionally, in the same way that an uninvolved external observer would' in order to arrive at 'full understanding' of our being.[4] Proust puts his finger on the unsustainability of such elevation of mind over matter, or at the expense of matter, by portraying several occasions in which the material, empirical reality intervenes with our mental and emotional states in a crucial way. A madeleine dipped in tea, an uneven paving stone, the feel of a napkin against the skin and the clink of a spoon against the coffee cup are the most famous examples of such sensuous, 'direct' bodily experiences that function as the magical key, a '*Sesame*' proper, in the process of the Narrator's revelation about 'le temps incorporé, des années passées non séparées de nous' (*RTP IV,* 623).[5]

According to Descartes, we gain knowledge of our being and things in the world not through direct experience nor through imagination but 'par la pensée' only:

> Nous ne concevons les corps que par la faculté d'entendre qui est en nous, & non point par l'imagination n[i] par les sens, & que nous ne les connaissons pas de ce que nous les voyons, ou que nous les touchons, mais *seulement* de ce que nous les concevons *par la pensée'*.[6]

In many ways, Proust's novel seems to call into question this idea of immediate, direct experience being secondary to thought. In fact, it seems the Proustian subject quite simply *needs* the bodily experience to arrive at any kind of genuine understanding of the self. Often the sensuous experiences that yield the Narrator a profound sense of existence seem not to be significant or remarkable as such, and it is unlikely that the Narrator would go searching for truths or his past from these sources 'seulement [...] par la pensée', without the sensuous trigger.

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[4] Taylor, p. 145 (my emphasis).

[5] The Narrator describes the occurrences of involuntary memory through these sensuous experiences described above as a kind of equivalent of a magical code which suddenly opens the doors to one's past: 'Mais c'est quelquefois au moment où tout nous semble perdu que l'avertissement arrive qui peut nous sauver: on a frappé à toutes les portes qui ne donnent sur rien, et la seule par où on peut entrer et qu'on aurait cherchée en vain pendant cent ans, on y heurte sans le savoir et elle s'ouvre.' (*RTP IV,* 445).

[6] Descartes, p. 157 (my emphasis).

It must be noted that the Cartesian dualism, too, 'needs the bodily as the Platonic [dualism] did not' since 'the Cartesian [soul] discovers and affirms his immaterial nature by objectifying the bodily', not through the world of Ideas.[7] However, in the Proustian universe, the bodily experience and its meaning, such as tasting the renowned madeleine, cannot be grasped by *objectifying* it – 'la vertu [quality] du breuvage' (*RTP I,* 45) is to be found neither in the taste nor through analysing the taste or texture of the madeleine. Rather, it is within the subject of the experience that the answer can be produced – and indeed, *produced,* not simply reached:

> Je pose la tasse et me tourne vers mon esprit. C'est à lui de trouver la vérité. Mais comment? Grave incertitude, toutes les fois que l'esprit se sent dépassé par lui-même; quand lui, le chercheur, est tout ensemble le pays obscur où il doit chercher et où tout son bagage ne lui sera de rien. *Chercher? pas seulement: créer.* Il est en face de quelque chose qui *n'est pas encore et que seul il peut réaliser,* puis faire entrer dans sa lumière.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 45 (my emphasis)

The question of how to arrive at the truth remains with the Narrator for the following three thousand or so pages, even though the answer – that the truth is obtainable not merely by searching for it but by *bringing it into being* – is already foreshadowed here. Creation here needs to be understood in broad terms: it points to the way a sensation moves our 'esprit' into a space of disclosure in between the self and the other, the familiar and the unfamiliar, and engages us in a creative interpretative process.

The suggestion that art may help us to understand our own selves – and not necessarily *what* the self is but rather how it comes to being – underlies Proust's narrative and surfaces into explicit statements in some of the passages of philosophical contemplation by the Narrator. Aesthetic experiences seem to function in this revelatory way because they grant us a certain kind of freedom to move between the imaginary and the real. In the present study, the synthesis of the epistemological and ontological (and indeed, also of the mental and somatic) dimensions of the self will therefore be argued out mainly through close-reading of passages in the *Recherche* which describe different aesthetic

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[7] Taylor, p. 146. For example, Descartes states that 'nous connaissons clairement et distinctement la douleur, la couleur, & les autres sentiments, lors que nous les considérons comme […] des pensées.' *Principles*, 1.68, in *Œuvres de Descartes,* ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1973), IX-2, p. 56.

experiences, together with passages describing the somewhat mystifying experiences of 'les moments bienheureux' and 'les intermittences du cœur'.

Thus, what primarily differentiates the Proustian view of selfhood from the Cartesian *cogito* is that it is not 'par la pensée' only (or even primarily) that we arrive at some kind of disclosure of reality and ourselves. Of course, to some extent the outside world, things and people in it, need to be objectified and arranged conceptually in order for us to be able to carry on with our daily lives.[8] But Proust's novel never fails to emphasise that thinking of one's own self in this kind of objective, conceptual way includes the risk of ignoring a vast and rich web of experiences that underlies the conscious, rational mind, as well as ignoring the crucial role of emotions and fortuitous impressions in the process of understanding the self and the world. As Malcolm Bowie remarks, 'the path towards meaning, or insight [in Proust] is a circuitous one: it is only by paying attention to such unworthy and unpromising things as blushes, silences, semantic vacancies or redundancies, and involuntary acts that truth may be approached'.[9]

For example, contemplating Albertine's departure, the Narrator makes the following remark about the difference between reasoning through intelligence and the 'real' experience:

> l'intelligence n'est pas l'instrument le plus subtil, le plus puissant, le plus approprié pour saisir le vrai, ce n'est qu'une raison de plus pour commencer par l'intelligence et non par un intuitivisme de l'inconscient, par une foi aux pressentiments toute faite. C'est la vie qui peu à peu, cas par cas, nous permet de remarquer que ce qui est le plus important pour notre cœur, ou pour notre esprit, ne nous est pas appris par le raisonnement mais par des puissances autres.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 7

[8] The idea that philosophical thought needs to be considered separately from everyday life thinking is present for example in Bergson, who distinguished between intuitive, philosophical knowledge and 'notre logique habituelle' – the relative everyday conception of things and phenomena, 'des habitudes nécessaires à la vie pratique [qui] nous mettent en présence d'une réalité déformée ou reformée, en tout cas *arrangée*'. Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant: essais et conférences* (Paris: Quadrige/Puf, 1985 [1938]), p.18, 22 (my emphasis).

[9] Malcolm Bowie, *Proust, Jealousy, Knowledge* (London: University of London, Queen Mary College, 1978), p. 8.

What is manifested here is the inability to access reality simply through reasoning and the elementary role of impression and life experience in the shaping of 'les innombrables et humbles "moi" qui nous composent' (*RTP IV,* 13). The 'facts' and our immediate experiences do not seem to become 'reality' automatically when we encounter them, but only when they are mediated. Indeed, the facts ('les faits') in the Proustian universe seem to be perpetually challenged by 'veritable impressions' caused by primary life experiences that have been segmented in our memory – and these experiences need not be particularly significant in any way but can be as basic as getting a haircut.

In the multiplicity of the selves and the need for communication arising from this multiplicity, the question arises of what makes an experience real to us and ours in the first place? Next, I turn to discuss the relationship between mediation and 'dévoilement' – the disclosure of truth or reality – and consider a more positive occasion of appropriating an experience in Proust where the Narrator sees the steeples of Martinville 'anew'.

1.2. The Primacy of Experience and Mediation: 'Les clochers de Martinville'

The problem of not being able to grasp or interpret experiences to his satisfaction simply by thinking about them objectively and trying to comprehend them 'intellectually' follows the Narrator throughout the novel. For example Heidegger discusses the failings of this kind of quasi-intellectual approach in *Being and Time* and suggests that mediation, when it reaches overly analytical measures, can in fact prevent us from grasping the 'disclosure' or 'unconcealment' (*aletheia)* of how things really are in the world. According to Heidegger, the only way we may actually feel ourselves being a part of the world and coherent is by ceasing to strive for 'immediate meaning' and instead acknowledging the processual nature of understanding our experiences in the world and in time.[10]

[10] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 342-44.

In his later essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger modifies his view by proposing that mediation through art seems to avoid this problem of detachment from the world that arises from treating it as an object and is therefore able to potentially enhance the sense of true disclosure of the world and our own selves.[11] A similar prospect is realised by Proust's Narrator at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé,* where the solution for this quandary between direct, 'insignificant' experiences and the sense of their crucial importance (despite their apparent intellectual or philosophical vacuity), seems to become at least potentially solvable through artistic creation.

Just prior to the description of writing the prose poem of the Martinville steeples, the Narrator has come to the conclusion that he will never be able to write himself. He is convinced that the tantalising sensations caused by things such as 'un reflet de soleil sur une pierre, l'odeur d'un chemin' (*RTP I,* 176) can never lead him towards executing his literary aspirations, because

> ce n'était pas des impressions de ce genre qui pouvaient me rendre l'espérance que j'avais perdue de pouvoir être un jour écrivain et poète, car elles étaient toujours liées à un objet particulier dépourvu de valeur intellectuelle et ne se rapportant à aucune vérité abstraite. Mais du moins elles me donnaient un plaisir irraisonné, l'illusion d'une sorte de fécondité et par là me distrayaient de l'ennui, du sentiment de mon impuissance que j'avais éprouvés chaque fois que j'avais cherché un sujet philosophique pour une grande œuvre littéraire.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 176-7

This is the starting point of the Narrator's aesthetic quest, exemplifying also the Proustian sense of irony, as it is exactly these kinds of sensuous, direct, everyday experiences which are 'dépourvu[s] de valeur intellectuelle et ne se rapportant à aucune vérité abstraite' and which the Narrator here presents as sources of 'un plaisir irraisonné' (and of little else) that eventually reveal to him the sense of 'le temps incorporé, des années passées non séparées de nous' (*RTP IV,* 623) and provide him with a topic for his book. With such a notion of time as its starting point, the Narrator's novelistic project seems to commence under the kind of hermeneutic reflection that 'exercises a self-criticism of thinking consciousness, a criticism that translates all its

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[11] Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of Work of Art' in *Martin Heidegger's Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by D. F. Krell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 143-187.

own abstractions [...] back into the whole of human experience of the world,' as Gadamer puts it.[12] It is precisely via this kind of 'self-criticism of thinking consciousness' that the Narrator is eventually able to set out to 'translate' this reality into a work of art.

The Martinville episode at the end of *Combray* describes one of the Narrator's earliest moments of artistic inspiration: the young Narrator feels compelled to put down in writing the sensations evoked by the sight of the Martinville steeples. While deep philosophical reflection, the progress of thought over the years, and meticulous labour at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé* present one side of the Narrator's work as a writer, the Martinville passage illustrates the other side: the sudden inexplicable urge, inspiration born out of direct impressions. This experience makes the Narrator aware of the temporality of the experience itself and his own existence (or in Heideggerian terms, his *Dasein* – a being who is constituted by the awareness of its own temporality), and the process of creation here seems to in some ways alleviate the anxiety caused by this realisation.

Travelling in Doctor Percepied's carriage, the Narrator perceives the Martinville steeples on the horizon – the same steeples he has seen countless times before, but which he now, due to the speed with which he now approaches them, sees in a completely new way:

> Au tournant d'un chemin j'éprouvai tout à coup ce plaisir spécial qui ne ressemblait à aucun autre, à apercevoir les deux clochers de Martinville, sur lesquels donnait le soleil couchant et que le mouvement de notre voiture et les lacets du chemin avaient l'air de faire changer de place, puis celui de Vieuxvicq qui, séparé d'eux par une colline et une vallée, et situé sur un plateau plus élevé dans le lointain, semblait pourtant tout voisin d'eux. ... [Je] sentais que je n'allais pas au bout de mon impression, que quelque chose était derrière ce mouvement, derrière cette clarté, quelque chose qu'ils semblaient contenir et dérober à la fois.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 177

It is suggested that this fresh yet familiar impression of the steeples does indeed hold ('contenir') the potential for some discovery, but also seems to slip away ('dérober') at

[12] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 94.

the same time: the impression situates itself somewhere between the familiar and the unfamiliar and calls for communication between the two.

Let us start by considering the role of perception here. Maurice Merleau-Ponty views perception as something which is always intentional in the sense that it is always directed towards something; it does not necessarily require or aim at action (such as expression) but always nevertheless registers the *potentiality* for action.[13] Merleau-Ponty's approach – especially in marking the significance of the sensuous and bodily in both our existence in the world and in the way we become conscious of it – offers a valuable alternative to the Cartesian *cogito* and chimes with the Proustian emphasis on the primary experience and impressions in the process of creation. As Dousson remarks in the *dossier* to *L'Œil et l'esprit:*

> Le *cogito*, c'est l'identité immédiate de soi à soi qui constitue le principe de tout rapport au monde comme idéalisme conférant une science élaborée indépendamment de l'expérience sensible, car fondée sur des idées innées. 'Je peux' exprime une sorte de *cogito* perceptif, qui s'établit […] par l'immersion originelle dans le monde qu'est l'habitation.[14]

The Cartesian 'cogito' ('je pense'*)* is replaced with a perceptive 'je peux', which operates not merely on the level of the mind but indeed in our direct, sensuous experience of the world as well.

There appears to be some kind of intentionality in the experience of the steeples, which, along the lines of Merleau-Ponty's theory, awaits to be *released*. What brings the Narrator closer to catching this pleasure and stopping it from disappearing is the idea of recording the experience, even though at first he seems reluctant to take on this task:

> Je ne savais pas la raison du plaisir que j'avais eu à les apercevoir à l'horizon et l'obligation de chercher à découvrir cette raison me semblait bien pénible; j'avais

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[13] In Merleau-Ponty's theory, the meaning is already in the world, and instead of creating it through thinking, we become part of it through perception. As Jean-Philippe Deranty remarks, 'our incarnation in the world through our bodies is the fundamental beginning of our learning to inhabit the world meaningfully. As a result of our being both in and of the world through our bodies, Merleau-Ponty believes that on the whole our presentations of the world reveal objective features of it.' 'Existentialist Aesthetics', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Autumn 2009 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/aesthetics-existentialist/> [Last accessed 20 May 2011].

[14] Lambert Dousson, the dossier to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *L'Œil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 87.

> envie de garder en réserve dans ma tête ces lignes remuantes au soleil et de n'y plus penser maintenant. Et il est probable que si je l'avais fait, les deux clochers seraient allés à jamais rejoindre tant d'arbres, de toits, de parfums, de sons, que j'avais distingués des autres à cause de ce plaisir obscur qu'ils m'avaient procuré et que je n'ai jamais approfondi.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 178

The need to understand the unexpected pleasure – and not just this particular moment of exhilaration but dozens of similar pleasures in the past – is so compelling, however, that instead of merely trying to 'garder en réserve dans [sa] tête' these lingering steeples, he borrows a pencil and a piece of paper from the doctor and writes down his account of the experience. While the task seems 'pénible' at first, the Narrator senses an opportunity to give meaning, not just to the steeples of Martinville – even though they are the cause of '[l]e plaisir spécial qui ne ressemblait à aucun autre' – but in fact to 'tant d'arbres, de toits, de parfums, de sons, que j'avais distingués des autres à cause de ce plaisir obscur qu'ils m'avaient procuré et que je n'ai jamais approfondi' (*RTP I,* 178).

On the one hand, these comments seem to suggest that the expression does not simply follow the experience, but that the Narrator's 'immersion' in the world – the sense of being a part of it in a full and inseparable way – seems to in fact happen *simultaneously* with the act of mediation. The experience here is not something regarded as a fixed yardstick against which expression is measured but, on the contrary, the expression seems to become an integral part of the experience itself. The direct and immediate experience (sensuous perception) alone – despite being 'fidèle' (*RTP I,* 6) and the initial trigger in the Narrator's search for truth here – is not enough to release the meaning that the steeples 'semblaient contenir et dérober à la fois' (*RTP I,* 178), no more than the 'esprit' would ever had been able to grasp this potential of the steeples without the immediate sensuous impression.

On the other hand, however, the writing process seems to be presented here as a kind of rupture, which in fact liberates the Narrator from the grasp of the experience itself. Having written his piece on the steeples of Martinville, the Narrator describes an intense sense of relief, happiness and satisfaction and says:

> Je ne repensais jamais à cette page, mais à ce moment-là, quand, au coin du siège où le cocher du docteur plaçait habituellement dans un panier les volailles qu'il avait achetées au marché de Martinville, j'eus fini de l'écrire, je me trouvai si heureux, je sentais qu'elle m'avait si parfaitement débarrassé de ces clochers et de ce qu'ils cachaient derrière eux, que, comme si j'avais été moi-même une poule et si je venais de pondre un œuf, je me mis à chanter à tue-tête.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 180

Here the pleasure seems to originate in the ability to record and then let go of the experience. However, we must note that this is not necessarily the view the Narrator would take later; in *Le Temps retrouvé,* he talks about the process of writing not as recording experiences but as a process of translating them (*RTP IV,* 469 and elsewhere) – a process which always includes an interpretative dimension, never just transparent presentation.

What the Narrator comes to understand and emphasises later is that 'la réalité' can only be found through internalisation, through subjectification of the experience as opposed to objectifying it; the aim of his ultimate literary project is not to *represent* some of his own 'truths' or universal 'truths', to be subsequently grasped by the reader, but simply to offer the reader a means to discover their own, by setting them forth to 'lire en eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610). This is why he will not ask his readers 'de me louer ou de me dénigrer' but instead 'de me dire si c'est bien cela, si les mots qu'ils lisent en eux-mêmes sont bien ceux que j'ai écrits' (*RTP IV,* 610).[15]

The finished work (the poem) itself does not get much attention in this passage: the Narrator does not relish the text (he, in fact, pronounces that he 'ne repensai[t] jamais à cette page') but rather looks back, with affectionate nostalgia, to this moment of creation, to feeling 'comme si j'avais été moi-même une poule et si je venais de pondre un œuf' (*RTP I,* 180). With the broader thematic concern of this study in mind, we may consider the end product of this process (the poem) as a kind of transmission of the experience to the hypothetical reader. The rather amusing metaphor of laying an egg suggests appositely that once the text has been 'laid', produced, and consequently exists

[15] The Proustian notion of 'la réalité' and the Narrator's statement of how it 'ne se forme que dans la mémoire' (*RTP I,* 182) will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

as an object in the world, it may then, under favourable circumstances, 'hatch' and take on a life of its own in the minds of its readers.

This further prompts us to ask whether a similar kind of ecstatic sense of 'la réalité' that the writing process here seems to produce can also be available – and possibly even more readily – to a *reader* of a book. This is the same question with which the Narrator concerns himself much later in *Le Temps retrouvé,* wondering if it is possible that 'les mots qu'ils [ses lecteurs] lisent en eux-mêmes sont bien ceux que j'ai écrits' (*RTP IV,* 610). The way the Narrator refuses the authority over his future book and prompts his readers to attach it to their own sphere of experience serves as one of the most explicit echoes of the phenomenological congruity of experience and mediation in Proust's novel.

Just like the Narrator's process of creation here, the process of self-understanding in general, according to the phenomenological approach, starts with simultaneous reassurance and bewilderment. This situation is not that different from the one in which readers find themselves when they read a book: they may both be heartened by the 'recognition' of themselves in the text and in the world of the narrative, and, at the same time, compelled to search for 'solid ground' for their experience in-the-world*,* precisely because the imaginary (the world of the book) suddenly feels so 'real' and 'true'. Thus, the process of reading, as we cross over between immediate experiences in-the-world and the mediated experiences offered by the book, reveals the similarities between lived and imagined experience.

To suggest that experiences of art in the *Recherche* enhance one's self-understanding and function as an important catalyst in the process of 'situating' oneself in the world is not, however, the same as to claim that art allows us some kind of immediate access to a conceptually comprehensive self. Rather, a work of art seems to pave the way to a hermeneutic reflection of who we are and who we are not. It can make us approach the familiar (including our 'ordinary notions of identity', our 'nominal' self) from new and unpredictable perspectives, and exactly by revealing what is other or foreign to us, it can disclose to us something essential about our selves.

In order to explore this self-revelatory potential of aesthetic experience in the coming chapters, we must first explore the distinction between the concepts of self-knowledge and self-understanding in a bit more detail. Whereas the former seems to be attached to conscious self-fashioning or self-portrayal, the latter relates to a far more open-ended approach to 'being oneself' – one which acknowledges that the self is subject to temporal contingency and the chance juxtapositions of experience. Next, I explore the difference between, on the one hand, aesthetic experience as a continuous process of creation and mediation through which the self comes to being, and, on the other, a rather more intentional and controlled portrayal of the self in relation to aesthetic experience.[16]

1.3. Choosing a Self? Aesthetic Experience, Self-fashioning, and Self-creation

Through its characters, the *Recherche* presents different ways in which art and aesthetic experience feature in the process of 'being oneself'. In order to look more closely at the Narrator's suggestion that aesthetic experience may enhance one's self-understanding, a certain distinction needs to be made between aesthetic experience as something which allows the subject to 'lire en soi-même' and the kind of more deliberate self-fashioning through art, done in order perceive oneself or to be perceived in a certain manner. This latter form of self-conceptualisation resembles the kind of deliberate 'portrayal' of the self that derives from the Renaissance ideology of a 'self-created' persona, *homo universalis* – a polymath to whom the world was to be discovered, studied and then lived in, in a kind of self-sufficient certainty.

In his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* Stephen Greenblatt discusses the importance of one's outward portraiture for the Renaissance individual and the Renaissance ideology of constructing one's identity to fit to socially acceptable parameters. He notes how 'in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a *manipulable*, artful process'.[17] The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed an increased interest in underlying structures and sign

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[16] In Chapter Six, I explore this mode of 'being oneself' in greater detail and consider it as parallel to the process of reading literature.

[17] Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 [1980]), p. 2 (my emphasis).

systems in society and language, which became acknowledged as crucial factors also in shaping the individual. In view of this new kind approach to selfhood, art – and literature in particular – became something which 'crosse[d] the boundaries between the creation of literary characters [and] the shaping of one's own identity' and with the help of which one could move from 'the experience of being moulded by forces outside one's control' to the attempts to fashion oneself.[18]

One of the characters in the *Recherche* who seems to follow the Renaissance-style self-fashioning is Mme Verdurin: she is a prime example of a character with an extreme interest – if not obsession – in her self-portrayal. Mme Verdurin uses her assumed aesthetic superiority, her 'taste', as the main currency in establishing and fortifying her social position – and frequently also in ridiculing and manipulating people.[19] The very fact that, in the course of the novel, she moves up the social ladder by marrying the Prince de Guermantes and becomes the 'queen' of the society she once considered boring, out-of-date, as well as intellectually and aesthetically inadequate, suggests Mme Verdurin's initial contempt for high society undoubtedly originates mainly in not being a part of it herself, rather than the aesthetic-intellectual void of this society. Although the possibility that Mme Verdurin is capable of genuinely appreciating and enjoying art is never rejected, the fact that her aesthetic creed is so quickly sacrificed for societal cause implies that her acclaimed dedication to art and her principles of ranking people according to their aesthetic-intellectual capacities rather than their social position are not altogether free from pretence.

In fact, several characters in Proust seem to exercise this kind of 'self-portrayal' through their aesthetic predilections to some extent. It must be noted, however, that in Proust's narrative the more in-depth 'first-hand' accounts of aesthetic experiences are mainly those of the Narrator or recounted from the Narrator's perspective. With the other characters, what we usually get is only the way these characters portray themselves and their relationship to art in social situations, rather than any actual deep analysis of how

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[18] Greenblatt, p. 3.

[19] Mme Verdurin's role in the separation between Charlus and Morel, for example, is pivotal. When she feels that her monocracy as the aesthetic 'director' of her salon is threatened by Charlus's presence, she convinces Morel that the relationship with the Baron is bound to bring his career to a halt and thus causes Morel to break up with him.

art affects their subjectivity. Swann is an exception in this sense, as in *Un Amour de Swann* Swann's experiences are described in some detail – although still of course through the central narrating voice of the *Recherche.*[20]

For Swann, too, aesthetic experiences play an essential role in the way he acts and thinks. However, unlike with Mme Verdurin, the careful attention he pays to his self-image is not guided (merely) by the expectations of others but indeed expectations and standards he sets for himself. Swann's self-fashioning, therefore, seems to be something of 'internalised' quality – how he himself wishes to perceive himself – as opposed to Mme Verdurin's flamboyant, often denunciatory attitude or other examples of aesthetic social charades in the novel.[21] Nevertheless, Swann's tendency to aestheticise reality often leads him to the verge of self-deception rather than self-understanding: for example, when he finds himself falling in love with Odette, Swann feels the need to justify his infatuation with this demimondaine and rather unsophisticated woman and does so by finding in her the resemblance to Botticelli's *Zipporah.*[22]

This is an attempt to fit his feelings into his aesthetic 'framework': through Swann Proust shows how this kind of *conscious* attempt to connect the aesthetic experience to 'real life' is doomed to fail, or remain superficial, because this means externalising the experience and the artwork alike, objectifying them, as opposed to experiencing the artwork as a part of one's own self. Swann's aesthetic 'system' will, as we shall see in the coming chapters, occasionally crumble unexpectedly, for example with the powerful experience of Vinteuil's music. The way music mixes together the memory of the happier days in Swann's and Odette's relationship and the bleak reality of the present moment prevents Swann from using it as a tool or as an object and forces him to acknowledge the changes taking place in himself.[23]

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[20] This of course produces a problem for the reader of Proust's novel of how the Narrator is able to be 'inside' Swann's head this way; the situation serves as one example of the inner inconsistencies within Proust's novel, which make it challenging to extract a 'theory of reading' from the *Recherche* and which we shall keep in mind throughout the study when analysing the Narrator's experiences and remarks at different points in time within the narrative.

[21] This issue will be discussed further in Chapter Five in the context of different reading modes.

[22] See *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* pp. 219-22. I will discuss this 'appropriation' of Zipporah as Odette further in Chapter Three.

[23] Swann's experiences of paintings and music will be discussed in more detail in chapters three and four.

In Proust's novel, these descriptions of aesthetic experiences of others (albeit often only observed from the outside) produce a point of comparison to the carefully depicted inner process of the Narrator's self-discovery and self-creation through art. For the young Narrator, the initial predicament in the aesthetic experience is the emphasis he places on the intellectual and philosophical contents of the work of art. The young Narrator, as Barbara Bucknall remarks, 'supposes that there are in existence truths so elevated that he could never discover them for himself' and his desire to read is fuelled with epistemic aims; however, here the Narrator 'is making the basic mistake of failing to realise that he could never reach [the truths in the books he reads] unless he was capable of re-creating them in his own mind, even if the occasion of this re-creation was his contact with a book.'[24] It is through Elstir's work (his impressionist paintings in particular) that the primacy of impression and the value of sensuous, direct experience in art start to unfold and steer the Narrator towards the understanding of 'la réalité' as something of which we are not only a part but which we also always create.

Through the Narrator's first-person accounts, we get to glimpse a more profound and 'genuine' aesthetic self-creation. For the Narrator, art seems to function as a means to disclose some kind coherence or at least continuity between different experiences (and his different selves), rather than *imposing* coherence on a self by copying or following an exterior model. The kind of 'outward portraiture' of the self that some of the characters aim at in search of social acceptance can only ever be nominal and temporal (as in applicable only to one point in time): using aesthetic experiences as a means of social embellishment brings the genuine process of appropriating them to a halt, because manifesting one's experiences in social situations means presenting them as instances, in simple temporal succession. The 'extratemporal' core of the self – what is shared between the subject's experiences in the past and in the present – can only be understood and approached by acknowledging the ongoing 'metamorphoses' caused by time and experience in the individual.[25]

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[24] Barbara J. Bucknall, *The Religion of Art in Proust* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1969), pp. 32-33.

[25] 'Le Bal de têtes' episode in *Le Temps retrouvé* provides an excellent display of the transformative powers of Time and the impossibility to arrive at a 'fixed' representation of an individual. For more discussion, see for example the insightful analysis of the passage by Ellison in his *Reader's Guide to In Search of Lost Time*, pp. 181-85.

Underneath this discussion lies the broader concern, essential to the development of Modernist subjectivity: that of the coherence of the self – or the lack of it. One of the hallmarks of Modernism is anxiety that originates in the disappearance of external authority in art as well as in life, described by Søren Kierkegaard as 'freedom's actuality, the possibility of possibility'.[26] In the midst of this freedom, understanding 'selfhood' becomes an apprenticeship of a sort, involvement in a constant process (which is both self-reflexive and self-reflective at the same time), rather than understanding the self as a fixed and uniform entity – very much in the same way that 'genuine' aesthetic experiences in Proust's novel, rather than providing answers to questions already existing, seem to generate new, important ones and continue to 'live on' in the one who experiences.

Kierkegaard, writing in the heyday of Romanticism, differs from his contemporaries in the respect that he undermines the possibilities of art to create coherence through representation of 'essences' or 'universal truths': the truths we can extract from art are not planted there by geniuses or authorial powers.[27] Kierkegaard foregrounds the existentialist crisis of modernity and the possibilities of overcoming this crisis through artistic expression. While German Idealism and Romanticism look at the artist as a genius who is born simultaneously with his artworks, Kierkegaard already foreshadows the Barthesian 'death of the author':

> In spite of the fact that a man writes, he is not essentially an author; he will be capable of writing the first […] and also the second part, but he cannot write the third part – *the last part he cannot write.* […] For though it is indeed by writing that one justifies the claim to be an author, it is also, strangely enough, by writing that one virtually renounces this claim.[28]

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[26] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety,* ed. and trans. by Reidar Thomte with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 42. For further discussion of the role of Kierkegaard's philosophy in the development of Modernist identity, see: Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 67-9, 80-84, 73-4, 145-8 and elsewhere.

[27] Even though there is a strong theological vein in Kierkegaard's philosophy, my primary interest lies in the existentialist and modernist perspectives of his work, introduced prominently in the *Concept of Anxiety* and *On Authority and Revelation*. These perspectives are not of course detached from the religious discourse, but (especially in these later works) Kierkegaard often uses this discourse to illustrate the anxiety-producing total freedom of the human subject to imagine and choose his own 'self'.

[28] Søren Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation,* ed. and trans. by Walter Lawrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 69 (my emphasis).

This kind of approach places a significant emphasis on the role of the reader, which makes Kierkegaard's existentialism specifically relevant to this study and the process of becoming 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610). In Proust, while allowing and requiring highly subjective experiences, the reading process, as we shall see, does not lead into obstructive subjectivism but in fact seems to point to art's potential to reconcile between immediate and mediated experience as well as between the self and the other. One of the ways in which a literary text may reach this affinity, according to the Narrator, is 'le miracle d'une analogie' that can be created through metaphor (*RTP IV,* 468).

Joshua Landy refers to this emphasis on creativity in any kind of 'knowledge' we may extract of the self by stating that Proust's novel recognises 'the crucial importance of fantasy in the process of self-fashioning'.[29] 'Fantasy', in Landy's discourse (and Landy here is talking about the role of art and of fiction especially in the formation of selfhood), refers primarily to the ways we use our imaginative faculties, but his choice of word, especially when combined with 'self-fashioning', nevertheless echoes the idea of the 'self' itself being something predominantly fantasised. This comment resonates back to the issue that was raised in the beginning of this chapter of how Proust's novel, in its presentation of subjectivity, seems to oscillate between a notion of selfhood that is based on some kind of extratemporal essence and a more proto-postmodern view which regards 'coherent' selfhood as illusory.

Acknowledging that imagination plays a pivotal role in the comprehension of selfhood does not, however, mean that we need to treat the self as something predominantly fantasised. Rather, the role of imagination can be emphasised through considering the self as a progression of selves whose 'real' (that is, not fantasised) experiences can only come together and be reflected on as '*my* experiences' with the help of imagination. It is this kind of notion of selfhood that I wish to explore in this study, and for these purposes, the concept of 'imagination' needs to be separated from 'fantasy' and

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[29] Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.1. Landy uses the term 'self-fashioning' in referring generally to self-formation or self-conceptualisation, not specifically in the sense of deliberate self-portrayal characterising the Renaissance ideology of self-formation, as I do above in 1.4.

approached as something more *concrete* than fantasy – something which in fact has real implications on the life and self-formation of the subject who imagines.

The difference between fantasy and imagination is described appositely by Iris Murdoch who remarks that they are

> two active faculties, one [fantasy] somewhat mechanically generating narrowly banal false pictures (the ego as all-powerful), and the other [imagination] freely and creatively exploring the world and moving toward the expression and elucidation (and in art celebration) of what is true and deep.[30]

Murdoch thus links imagination to expression, or at least aspiration toward expression, and 'elucidation' through exploring the world 'freely and creatively'. The underlying question here is whether one needs to in fact express oneself, to create something, in order to celebrate 'what is true and deep', or whether the experience *of* an artwork – actively and creatively 'taking in' a work of art – can also provide such illuminations.

The crucial role imagination plays in self-understanding can partly be explained by the way in which imagination is never 'external', something simply fantasised, but always draws from our own past experience. The idea that our approaches to art draw inherently from our life experience (as well as our experience of other artworks) is a common-sense assumption, but one to which Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics has given a convincing critical frame. According to Gadamer's theory, 'only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world.'[31] 'Aesthetic' reading in Proust's novel – reading which is freed from the objective of immediate rational 'gain' or profit – has a significant role to play in the process of self-understanding, precisely because it seems to effectively break down the (artificial) separation between mediated aesthetic experience and life experience by bringing the two together in the reading process.

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[30] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as Guide to Morals* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 321.

[31] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 15.

Thus, in the hermeneutic practise, the function of art is not simply to introduce some kind of coherence into the mind of the subject; it may of course do that, but the implications of the aesthetic experience span further than this. As Gabriel Josipovici notes, Modernist art is concerned with 'neither illustration nor abstraction but the daily struggle of a dialogue with the world, without any assurance that what one will produce will have value because there is nothing already there against which to test it, but with the possibility always present that something new, something genuine, something surprising, will emerge'.[32] This kind of openness is exactly what the hermeneutic approach emphasises – a genuine dialogue between the familiar and the unfamiliar, for which an aesthetic experience may provide an ideal setting in the disclosive [sic] space of the 'in-between'.[33]

For the remaining part of this chapter, let us consider this 'familiarity' and the disclosure of 'la réalité' in connection to the Proustian theory of memory, which is most vitally characterised by the distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory. While voluntary memory is often presented as an (inadequate) instrument for self-formation, involuntary memory in Proust features as an elementary force that underlies our subjectivity – one without which language, imagination, and to some extent even our very basic sensuous perception remain impotent.

1.4. 'The carrying of concealed weapons': Time, Memory, and Imagination

As we saw above in the context of the passage from *Albertine disparue* and the Martinville steeples, for the Narrator the process of turning 'les faits' (acquired by the intellect) and his primary direct impressions (perceived by the senses) into 'la réalité' necessitates mediation through both imagination and memory. The phenomenological premise that even our imagination is ultimately based on the 'familiar' and draws from our experiences in and of the world seems to find a footing in Proust's novel, not least due to the immense role that memory plays in it.

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[32] Josipovici, p. 185.

[33] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* second rev. edition, trans. and rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), p. 295.

The question of to what extent our memories – partly voluntary, partly involuntary – make us who we are has been the focus of countless philosophical investigations into selfhood for centuries and features prominently in a broad corpus of studies on Proust's novel.[34] This concern is central to the philosophy of Henri Bergson whose notions of selfhood, memory and time provided the philosophical impetus for Proust in his treatment of the subject matter and whose influence I discuss briefly below. As the workings of memory are not the main concern of my study, in the following I focus on acknowledging some of the ways in which Proust's novel views memory (and involuntary memory in particular) in the process of self-understanding and, in the light of discussion, further reflect on the relation between primary experience and mediation.

In *Proust et les signes,* Deleuze remarks that the resemblances between Proust and Bergson's ways of defining time are not in duration but in memory which is something embodied within us: 'Ce passé ne représente pas quelque chose qui a été, mais simplement quelque chose *qui est,* et *qui coexiste avec soi comme [le] présent*.'[35] Proust, however, moves beyond the idea of time embodied in us, asking how exactly we are able to recognise or access this past within us, examining the potential for such processes for example in the context of aesthetic experiences. Joshua Landy suggests for the Narrator, 'involuntary memory is really not memory at all', since

> when an odour, texture, or sound returns to us a former state, we are not dragging into the light a set of impressions that have long since departed but, instead, summoning up a part of us that is still very much present within our mind. Only in this way is it possible to re-experience *from within* a situation we approached with a radically different set of attitudes, beliefs and desires.[36]

This observation is, in fact, almost directly the idea Bergson presents in *La Pensée et le mouvant,* where he states that 'la conservation du passé dans le présent n'est pas autre

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[34] To mention but a few, the role of memory in the Proustian selfhood has been discussed for example by Roger Shattuck in *Proust's Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Christie McDonald in *The Proustian Fabric: Associations of Memory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); and Richard Terdiman in *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 151-239 (especially on Proust).

[35] Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Perspective critiques, 1976 [1964]), pp. 73-6 (my emphasis).

[36] Landy, p. 110 (my emphasis).

chose que l'indivisibilité du changement'[37]. Our default, according to Bergson, is to preserve the past within us, and therefore it is the forgetting of which we actually take notice:

> La mémoire n'a donc pas besoin d'explication. Ou plutôt, il n'y pas de faculté spéciale dont le rôle soit de retenir du passé pour le verser dans le présent. Le passé se conserve de lui-même, automatiquement. […] Mais si nous tenons compte de la continuité de la vie intérieure et par conséquent de son indivisibilité, ce n'est plus la conservation du passé qu'il s'agira d'expliquer, c'est au contraire son apparente abolition. *Nous n'aurons plus à rendre compte du souvenir mais de l'oubli*.[38]

The past being preserved automatically within us does not mean that everything is automatically remembered, however.[39] As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, the Narrator's selves who are not yet aware of Albertine's departure keep cropping up unexpectedly – and indeed, involuntarily – through 'la reviviscence intermittente et involontaire d'une impression spécifique, venue du dehors, et que nous n'avons pas choisie.' (*RTP IV,* 14) The force of memory is a volatile force and it works in close collaboration with the seemingly insignificant bodily experiences; neither one of these dimensions of the self – the memory or the way it is segmented within us through bodily traces, can ever be totally governed 'par la pensée'.[40]

Also, if forgetting marks and reveals to us the discontinuity of the self – an upsetting realisation that we have been denied access to our past – remembering, in Proust, does

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[37] Bergson, p. 173.

[38] Bergson, p. 171 (my emphasis).

[39] The idea of past being automatically contained in the present appears in several of Proust's metaphors, such as the body as 'un vase où notre spiritualité serait enclose, qui nous induit à supposer que tous nos biens intérieurs, nos joies passées, tour nos douleurs sont perpétuellement en notre possession' (*RTP III,* 153-4), which I analyse in Chapter Six.

[40] This idea resonates with Emmanuel Lévinas's theory about the memory of the flesh, presented in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1974). Deeming the 'unconscious' as too much defined by its opponent, the conscious, Lévinas emphasises the significance of the body in the workings of our memory, and involuntary memory in particular: the fact that the body always already exists in relation to something – be it merely the basic elements of the physical world, such as light or air or temperature – and that it senses and changes under these conditions makes the body absolutely fundamental to the way we inhabit the world and time. In Proust, an excellent example of the mnemonic potential of the body can be found right in the opening passage of the novel, when the Narrator, waking up from sleep and recomposing 'les traits originaux de mon moi' (*RTP I,* 5-6), refers to the *fidelity* of the body in safeguarding our experiences and doing a better job at it than our 'esprit'; he describes the bodily sensations as '[les] gardiens fidèles d'un passé que mon esprit n'aurait jamais dû oublier' (*RTP I,* 6). I return to this passage and its implications on the Proustian selfhood in Chapter Six.

not play an unequivocally unproblematic role either. The crucial distinction that is made in the *Recherche* between involuntary memory and deliberate reminiscing is significant also as far as the role of memory in the process of understanding 'la réalité' and one's own self is concerned. It is suggested on several occasions in the *Recherche,* as we shall see in the coming chapters, that willed, voluntary remembrance and attempts to define the self through it, seem to actually take us further away from our genuine experiences and our initial impressions. Kierkegaard discusses this same scenario of losing an important dimension of an experience by focusing too much on wanting to *remember* it in, attempting to 'store' it for the future. He writes:

> The carrying of concealed weapons is usually forbidden, but no weapon is so dangerous as the art of remembering. It gives one a very peculiar feeling in the midst of one's enjoyment to look back upon it for the purpose of remembering it.[41]

This kind of 'instrumentalisation' of memory that breaks the present moment by reminding us it is passing is frequently present in Proust's Narrator's endeavours; he often pauses to 'take in' experiences or contemplate the motives, reactions and intentions of the people involved, but in attempting to find an explanation for one mystery or another (Albertine's behaviour being a recurring example), in his attempts to analyse the situation, he often actually ends up not 'living in the moment' or enjoying it.

This urge to remember resonates with Heidegger's idea of the general human tendency towards 'forgetfulness of Being' – the way Western thinking is obsessed with the present, characterised by the desire for an immediate access to meaning through a certain tradition of intellectual (or scholarly) thought and analysis.[42] According to Heidegger, the 'metaphysics of presence' – how we strive for explanation through objectifying and labelling our experiences – often stops us feeling in harmony with our experience and through it with the world. The alternative to 'the metaphysics of presence', then, Heidegger suggests, is the experience of phenomenological continuity of Being, acknowledging the inseparability of past and present within us. In order to do so, we must refrain from 'subscrib[ing] to a "standpoint" or represent[ing] any special

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[41] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or,* trans. by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 289.

[42] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* p. 43.

"direction"; 'phenomenology', Heidegger states, 'is nothing of either sort, nor can it become so as long as it understands itself.'[43]

With the madeleine, for example, the Narrator feels the urge to interpret these experiences intellectually or at least *identify* the links between the two alike experiences. While at this stage he fails to do so and is left with a sense of failure, he does already with the madeleine and the tea acknowledge that 'la vérité que je cherche n'est pas en lui [le breuvage], mais en moi' (*RTP I,* 45), and furthermore that it cannot be reached merely by *seeking*: 'la vérité' cannot to be found 'out' in the world, outside the self, because a real experience is never fully confined within something external but rather in the way we have embodied and encompassed it. Instead of merely 'registering' and finding, in order to arrive at this disclosure, the experience and its interpretation need to be considered as two sides of the same coin. While at first the magic of 'moments bienheureux' seems to reside in the way they appear to make mediation futile, the Narrator in fact identifies his 'extratemporal' rapture precisely through mediation – by connecting the threads between a past experience and the present one, by identifying this connection and reflecting upon it.

It is exactly this kind of sense of continuity that the Narrator also experiences in his moment of inspiration caused by the Martinville steeples. What seems to create and install this 'bonheur' in the Narrator is the feeling of the inseparability of past and present within him. While with involuntary memory this rapport seems fortuitous and fleeting, 'le miracle d'une analogie' (*RTP IV,* 468) will later assist the adult Narrator in 'safeguarding' the way in which the past is present in the present. In order to feel such unity and comprehend the idea of embodied time, we must not employ memory as a tool with which to plough the layers of the past but rather maintain and fertilise those layers through creative association.[44] This kind of imaginative process – not just the discovery of what was in the past, but, moreover, the creative exploration of *how* the past is in the present (and in us) – paves the way to more than a 'fantasised' understanding of the self.

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[43] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 50.

[44] This analogy is linked to the Narrator's metaphor of 'sol mental' (*RTP I,* 182) – our 'mental soil' composed of layers of experience – which I shall discuss later in Chapter Six.

In Proust, some kind of genuine understanding of the self seems to become available through aesthetic experience, even if this might not mean grasping a totally unified, coherent, essentialist subject. A distinction needs to be made, therefore, between conceptual, objective self-knowledge and self-understanding as a hermeneutic process, the latter of which is what the present study is interested in. The most favourable approach for the purposes of this study and the exploration of notions such as selfhood, reality, experience, impression and embodiment in Proust, is available in phenomenological and hermeneutic aesthetics, which emphasise the human subject as an interpreting questioner at the centre of these experiences. The experience of reading especially, as we shall see, seems to aid the process of self-reflection by being inherently 'processual' in nature and based on the collaboration between the subject's direct lived experiences and impressions (and the marks these experiences have left on our memory) and the mediation of these experiences through language. When we think of the links between the process of 'being oneself' and the process of reading literature, we see how reading as such a gradual and interpretative process may (instead of being escapist and fantasised) occasion some kind of reattachment of the reader to the world.

This does not mean, however, that the aesthetic experience becomes a simple case of self-confirmation. Rather, the true prospect of these experiences, as we shall see in the coming chapters, resides precisely in their ability to uncover hidden dimensions of the self by engaging the subject in the process of interpretation and mediation. This process is prompted by the encounter with something new, unfamiliar, other; in this sense, the Proustian aesthetic experience seems to resound with the phenomenological conceptions of truth and reality as disclosure or 'dévoilement'. In Sartre's terms, 'dévoilement' is in itself already a kind of mediation, and Sartre acknowledges the problem surrounding the idea of 'pure' direct perception of something and states that as soon as objects or phenomena are perceived and registered by our consciousness they become intentional

in some ways: 'La conscience ne précède jamais l'objet,' Sartre writes, but 'l'intention se révèle à elle-même en même temps qu'elle se réalise, dans et par sa réalisation.'[45]

With this processual view of reality and selfhood in mind, let us return to the passage quoted in the beginning of the chapter, where the fact of Albertine's departure seems to be repeatedly conflicting with the 'reality' of the Narrator's different past selves who have not yet been touched by the present tragedy. These selves are not just 'former' selves but also 'habitual', recurring selves – like the self who is getting a haircut. In addition to representing the way in which the subject is composed of different selves, each of which surfaces in a specific context, the 'haircut self' is a good example of how such seemingly insignificant experiences get woven into our subjectivity, contributing to 'des innombrables et humbles "moi" qui nous composent' (*RTP IV,* 13) and watering down also the Cartesian separation between the mental and the embodied experience.[46]

What this passage also manifests is how the various other selves do not just passively and remotely linger somewhere behind the current self but indeed coexist within the self who presently experiences, which in turn resonates the Bergsonian idea of the past being conserved in the present automatically. While the sense of incoherence the Narrator feels here cannot go unmarked, it is precisely this incoherence which calls for mediation and communication with one's own self. While the past is conserved 'automatically' in the present (in the form of the Narrator's former selves that keep cropping up in different contexts), 'le fait' of the present moment does not automatically insinuate itself into the past. In order to become 'la réalité', it needs to be *made a part of the past* through mediation, and this is why the fact of Albertine's departure only becomes reality when mediated to all these different selves.[47]

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[45]Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), p. 22. These comments show Sartre at his most 'Heideggerian', resonating with the idea that our true understanding of the world and our place in it is 'grounded in our practical engagements (*Verhalten*) with the world', as Moran puts it; while this process of understanding is 'interpretative from the very start', 'interpretative involvement with things need not be at a level of intellection or cognition, but more usually comes in concernful, practical dealings'. Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 231. In Proust, tasting the madeleine or stumbling over the uneven paving stone might serve as examples of Heideggerian 'practical dealings'.

[46] The other delightful aspect of the haircut example is the metaphorical dimension: hair as something which carries the traces of experience with us – *thread* within which the lived experience has been 'recorded'.

[47] I return to this distinction between 'le fait' and 'la réalité' later in Chapter Six, discussing it in view of the Narrator's 'intermittences du cœur'. (See pp. 187-190).

This mediation does not happen through intellect or through an objectifying 'pensée' alone but always necessitates 'la reviviscence intermittente et involontaire d'une impression spécifique, venue du dehors, et que nous n'avons pas choisie.' (*RTP IV,* 14) Understanding oneself thus becomes indeed a *process* in which the unfamiliar (as well as the 'otherness' within the self) needs to be allowed to surface in order for us to arrive at any true sense of reality and in which the role of involuntary and intermittent impressions overrides intellectual deliberation. The Narrator's remark that we need something 'du dehors' (*RTP IV,* 14) to point out to us what lies hidden within ourselves is particularly interesting here, and it resonates with the Narrator's later statements about the role of an artwork as an optical instrument through which we read ourselves (*RTP IV,* 610).

In the next chapter, I examine this seemingly paradoxical proposal the Narrator presents in *Le Temps retrouvé* about the readers becoming 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610) through someone else's text and further discuss the difference between writing and reading as (potentially) self-revelatory processes. In addition to the reader-writer relationship, the Narrator's suggestion prompts us to consider the relationship between literature, fiction, and truth in general.

2. ‘Ce plaisir que j’avais à créer moi-même’: Writing, Reading, and Truths

In *Le Temps retrouvé,* on his way to a party in the Guermantes house, the Narrator stumbles over an uneven paving stone in the courtyard and suddenly vividly remembers Venice. He remarks how ‘un azur profond enivrait mes yeux, des impressions de fraîcheur, d’éblouissante lumière tournoyaient près de moi,’ and wanting to hold onto these images evoked, he keeps, despite the ridicule of the drivers who are watching him, balancing himself for a moment on that uneven paving (*RTP IV,* 445). This memory comes in alike manner to the kind of profusion of sensations with which the taste of the madeleine restores Combray for him, giving him a sense of extraordinary release from his habitual disquiet:

> Comme au moment où je goûtais la madeleine, toute inquiétude sur l’avenir, tout doute intellectuel étaient dissipés. Ceux qui m’assaillaient tout à l’heure au sujet de la réalité de mes dons littéraires et même de la réalité de la littérature se trouvaient levés comme par enchantement.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 445

This experience reinstates the Narrator’s desire to explore the ‘sujet de la réalité’ in writing, as well as restores his faith in the ‘realness’ of literature itself. A little later, when the Narrator is waiting in the Guermantes library to be let into the party, his conviction is further supported by a range of similar impressions (produced by the clink of a spoon against the coffee cup and the feel of a napkin against his mouth) as well as by sensations evoked by browsing in some familiar books he picks up from the shelf. After a long period of disillusionment, he suddenly becomes optimistic regarding the possibility of mediating experiences in such way that this mediation may allow one access to the kind of unexpected ‘bonheur’ that involuntary memory can only ever yield transitorily and by chance. What the Narrator comes to realise and what reignites his vocation is that this continuity and sense of wholeness is not something that can simply be ‘presented’ in a text, but needs to be planted in creative analogies (such as

metaphors) which require – like 'la réalité' itself – creative 'opening up' by the subject of the experience.

This suggestion that a literary text may facilitate our grasp of reality and release truths within its readers opens up several questions. In order to explore the paradox of becoming 'le propre lecteur de soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) through someone else's text, we need first to consider the relationship between literature, fiction and truth more generally, and then look at the ways in which Proust's novel presents the relationship between the writer and the reader. If the task of the writer is the veritable translation of life into literature, we may ask whether reading, then, can be regarded indeed as translation of literature back to life through the reader? As the writing process seems to be incessantly shadowed by fortuity and different kinds of emotive restrictions – at least as far as the Narrator is concerned – could reading, in fact, in some ways hold a stronger potential as a *self*-revelatory experience than writing?

I consider the writing process here mainly through the Narrator-protagonist and by examining the writer-Narrator's philosophical deliberations in *Le Temps retrouvé*, although we must keep in mind that the Narrator-protagonist does not, apart from the Martinville prose poem and his article in *Le Figaro,* really seem to get much writing done in the course of the novel; however, once again the first-person narrating voice allows us to examine him more closely than other characters. Reading here will mostly be discussed through the Narrator's propositions regarding the readers of his future book.

A lot of critical attention has been paid to the questions of whether or not the book the Narrator embarks on writing in *Le Temps retrouvé* is in fact the novel we have just read; to what extent the Narrator represents Proust the author; and, respectively, whether the reader the Narrator discusses in the context of the imminent book is the reader of Proust's novel or, in fact, an 'imminent' reader. Joshua Landy for example discusses at length the importance of distinguishing not only Proust from his Narrator, but also the novel the Narrator is going to write from the *Recherche*, proposing that there are, in fact, three texts that Proust's reader faces. First, there is the novel by Proust, *A la Recherche du temps perdu;* secondly, we have the 'memoirs' of the Narrator, which he

has been working on during the narrative of the *Recherche* and in which he uses his experiences in society. (Landy names the Narrator's memoir *My Life,* undoubtedly in order to facilitate the following discussion.) Thirdly, there is also the impending work of art – 'l'œuvre' – of which the Narrator talks in *Le Temps retrouvé*.[1]

Landy's argument is useful in bringing out the difficulty of trying to pinpoint an 'implied reader' within the *Recherche*; considering this multiplicity of different textual and meta-textual layers within Proust's novel, one cannot really talk about *an* implied reader but rather a series of implied readers. Later on in Chapter Five, I analyse different readers within Proust's novel and examine more closely the different modes of reading manifested in the *Recherche.* In order to explore the specificity of the experience of reading literary texts (both from the perspective of the reader and the writer) and the communicative and philosophical potential of literary art works in Proust, we must begin by briefly establishing what is meant by 'literature' and 'literary' in this study.

In the contemporary critical milieu, the attempts to define literature have not only got increasingly problematic, but also in some ways been obliterated. One now somewhat dated definition is based on the idea of 'traditional' Western literature as a rather unspecific but still distinctly prevailing canon of texts. As Nicholas Harrison remarks in his preface to *The Idea of the Literary,* 'if the term "literary" now has a certain currency in preference to "literature" […] it is partly because "literature" is for some critics associated with dogmatic or essentialist attempts at definition and with a relatively narrow, traditional canon'.[2] Many critics with, for example, postcolonial, feminist or queer interests have 'reconsidered the groundings of such a canon, often in order to attack it' and some have even 'abandoned entirely the study of literary texts'.[3]

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[1] Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 40. Landy remarks how the Narrator 'habitually refers to the text at hand as 'ce récit' (or the more neutral 'cet ouvrage'), whereas he nearly always refers to the inchoate work as 'mon livre' or 'mon œuvre'.

[2] Harrison, Nicholas (ed.) 'The Idea of the Literary' in *Paragraph* Vol. 28 Number 2 July 2005 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. v.

[3] Ibid.

To acknowledge the impossibility of formulating clear-cut descriptions of 'literature' is not, however, to suggest literary texts themselves would be becoming obliterated or 'useless'; on the contrary, as Harrison points out, the task of literary criticism is to face the challenge that the post-canonical situation throws at it: to examine the 'real' ways in which literature continues to function in the world. Proust's *Recherche,* despite being traditionally considered as a part of the Western literary canon, also has qualities which make it highly apposite in the post-canonical context, not least due to the way the reader is presented in it and the way Proust's novel emphasises the reader's role in defining an experience as 'literary'. 'Literariness' in the *Recherche*, rather than being confined to certain kinds of texts, seems to depend greatly on the *mode* of reading.[4] Furthermore, Proust's novel itself does not fit in any clear-cut category but represents a hybrid of genres: the *Recherche* is first and foremost a novel but embodies elements of philosophical treatise, biography, memoir and so on.

'Literature' *in* Proust's novel is not restricted to fiction, drama and poetry, either. In the narrative, we encounter autobiographies (such as the fictional *Mémoires de Mme de Beausergent*), the Sévigné correspondence and librettos (e.g. Massenet's *Manon)* which are all read differently from texts with pragmatic aims such as telegrams, pamphlets, letters or newspapers. This meta-textual richness within Proust's work prompts us to consider 'literature' as the *Recherche* presents it as something broader than a certain culture-specific selection of texts. Also, keeping in mind the Narrator's statement that true life – 'la vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie […] c'est la littérature' (*RTP IV,* 474**)**, any attempts to rigorously define what a 'literary text' in Proust is, would seem abortive, to say the least.

Peter Lamarque suggests that, instead of focusing narrowly on (and trying to define) the 'concept' of literature, we should instead examine literature as a phenomenon which 'elevat[es] certain kinds of linguistic activities – notably story-telling or poetry-making or drama – to an art form issuing in products that are revered.'[5] This proposition seems to steer back to the idea of canon (especially as Lamarque considers the way in which

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[4] This suggestion will be argued out in Chapter Five with more detailed analysis of how different characters read in the *Recherche.*

[5] Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 8.

texts gain certain 'cultural significance' as an inherent part of this phenomenon); however, the more 'personal' dimension of literary experiences – literature's emotional impact, the effects of reading literature on one's imagination and the 'cognitive strengthening' gained through literature – are still considered by Lamarque as the real hallmarks of the truth-releasing potential of a literary text.[6] My approach to literature in this study will focus primarily on this latter dimension: literature as a phenomenon happening at the level of an individual's sphere of experience and in the disclosure of his or her subjectivity.[7]

As suggested in the introduction to this study, one way to approach the phenomenon of literature and its impact on individual readers is to consider the specificity of the aesthetic reading process through the question of what is 'other' to literature. Regarding the Narrator's philosophical contemplations in *Le Temps retrouvé,* it is right to ask if there is a 'treatise' or a theory of reading present in the novel, and furthermore how does a literary text differ from and possibly improve on a 'purely' philosophical deliberation. The relationship between literature (and fiction in particular) and philosophy in Proust has been valuably discussed in Vincent Descombes's study *Proust: Philosophie du roman* as well as in Joshua Landy's *Philosophy as Fiction*.[8]

Even though I do discuss epistemological and metaphysical aspects of the reading experience, in the present study the emphasis is primarily on the hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches to *reading* fiction rather than on the philosophy of fiction itself. The *Recherche* offers an exemplary domain for examining the 'phenomenon of literature' not just in view of its more generic cultural significance but, indeed, in

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[6] Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen. *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, pp. 239, 243, 251-2 and elsewhere.

[7] The present study emphasises the idea that a literary text may operate in its readers' lives as a means to enrich their self-understanding; I explore this prospect primarily by analysing how literature functions within the world of the *Recherche,* on the level of the narrative. The philosophical implications of Proust's novel do however unquestionably reach beyond the world of the narrative, and the exploration of how the reading experience *of* Proust's novel may gain legitimacy in-the-world – that is to say, examining the experiences of the *actual* readers of Proust's novel – is one domain in which Proust studies could also be expanded. The task of bringing Proust 'back into the world' has been undertaken for example by Véronique Aubouy who in her project *Proust lu* films different people reading extracts Proust's novel in the most imaginative places. (Aubouy's project is still ongoing and available at <http://www.veronique.aubouy.fr/proust-lu.html>).

[8] Vincent Descombes, *Proust: Philosophie du roman* (Paris: Minuit, Coll 'Critique', 1987).

exploring the potential of literary experience from the viewpoint of the individual. As the germ of this study is the Narrator's proposition of the readers becoming 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610), my main emphasis will be on the question of how fictional texts can evoke a sense of 'la réalité' and release '[les] vérités profondes et uniques' (*RTP III,* 882) within the reader. The presence of language is what makes a literary experience inherently different from 'unmediated' experiences as well as other, non-linguistic, aesthetic experiences – not least because of the way in which language always bears, implicitly or explicitly, relation to 'truth' and knowledge.

2.1. Fictive Texts, Real Experiences: Literature and Truths

Descombes's study – one of the most in-depth investigations into the philosophical qualities of the *Recherche* – follows the view that

> tous les romans [sont] philosophiques à quelque degré. […] Un roman est philosophique s'il manifeste une discipline de pensée analogue à celle qu'incarne la philosophie dans la tradition occidentale. Quant à savoir ce qui donne à la forme d'élucidation, c'est ce qui reste à déterminer.[9]

In many ways, the *Recherche* manifests the idea that literature *is* philosophy, not only in what it makes us think but indeed *how* it makes us think. Proust's novel effectively shows how a fictional work may communicate impressions which do not *as such* seem to bear great philosophical importance (such as a moment of stumbling over a paving stone) but which may, when examined as a part of the individual sphere of experience within a fictive framework, create favourable conditions for the reader to realise (their own) philosophical insights or truths.

This idea is embedded in the Protagonist's apprenticeship. Indeed, the young Narrator laments over the fact that he seems to find joy and genuine exhilaration in seemingly inconsequential things, but eventually it is exactly these kinds of experiences which allow him to engage in deep philosophical reflection. In these passages of philosophical contemplation, the Narrator or the narrating voice exhibits more directly – although

[9] Descombes, pp. 42-46.

often through the kind of questioning mode – his philosophical insights and the role of the more 'mundane' experiences as well as aesthetic experiences in grasping 'les vérités profondes et uniques' (*RTP III,* 882).

What makes Proust's novel so inherently philosophical, according to Descombes, is the way in which Proust arranges his text – not just the content or the form of the text but the two of them together:

> écrire un roman, loin d'être un simple passe-temps ou une évasion imaginaire, est justement ce 'travail intellectuel et moral' que demande Proust. Or nous cherchons ici la philosophie du roman, *non dans telle ou telle idée, mais dans ce travail lui-même.* […] On peut dire, je crois, que la philosophie cherche à éclaircir des pensées par la voie d'un examen des propositions dans lesquelles ces pensées sont communiquées.[10]

For example, the technique used by Proust of presenting his Narrator as a genuine *questioner,* constantly in doubt and on the qui vive, makes the philosophical agenda of the novel a great deal more organic than simply having his protagonist as a mouthpiece for Proust's own philosophical exposition. Indeed, as Margaret Topping remarks, Proust, in his presentation of selfhood (as well as other prominent philosophical themes) 'is consciously experimenting with different genres, tones and registers, exploiting a philosophical unity within aesthetic diversity'.[11]

The freedom of interpretation allowed by this technique seems to lift a literary work of art onto an altogether different affective level; a novel seems to improve on a philosophical treatise in tackling traditional philosophical questions – aesthetic, ontological, and epistemological – in the sense that it naturally and inherently embodies one element which most philosophical studies approach and try to examine objectively, although it is an integral part of almost any activity of human thought: namely, imagination.

In view of the Narrator's discussion of the reader's role, I suggest that the mode of reading could also be added to the list. The truths to be found in literature are not

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[10] Descombes, p. 71 (my emphasis).

[11] Margaret Topping, *Supernatural Proust: Myth and Metaphor in A la Recherche du temps perdu* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 5.

ultimately truths of 'intelligence' or logic planted there consciously by an authorial figure or voice, since the ultimate work of art, 'notre seul livre, le livre intérieur de signes inconnus' (*RTP IV,* 458)' already exists *within us*, affecting the ways in which we read. Indeed, it seems that the role of the audience is crucial in releasing the philosophical potential of a literary work.

This suggested truth-releasing potential of literary artworks, fiction especially, prompts several questions, however. We may ask, for example, why is it that we become, as Walton Kendall puts it, 'highly charged emotionally' when reading about fictional (non-real) characters and situations, even when we know they are not 'real' or 'true'?[12] An excellent example of such evocative power of literature appears in *Sodome et Gomorrhe II,* where Charlus describes a certain 'homme de goût' who, when asked 'quel événement l'avait le plus affligé dans sa vie' is said to have replied: 'La mort de Lucien de Rubempré dans *Splendeurs et Misères* [de Balzac]' (*RTP III,* 438). According to Kendall, in order for the readers to have such cathartic reactions, they in fact need to be practising forms of 'make-believe' or 'pretence' whilst reading.[13] This theory supports the idea that we need a specific attitude, a specific *mode,* when reading fictional texts in order to experience what we read as 'real', without turning into gullible simpletons.

However, this then leads us to ask: how can we arrive at truths by *pretending?* If the reading of a fictional text requires a certain kind of pretence or make-believe from the reader, how can it reveal to us truths or provide us with genuine understanding of something? I shall explore this question with specific references to Proust's text in Chapter Five, suggesting that in Proust's novel, in the most successful 'moyen de lire', this 'pretence' or 'make-believe' is not reached by deliberately applying a certain set of reading methods – it is not a conscious choice or a technique, but rather something which the reader allows in the universe of the text which is free from practical aims and restraints. For the time being, however, let us focus on examining the relation between an experience in a fictional framework and a 'real' experience.

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[12] Walton Kendall, 'Spelunking, Stimulation, and Slime: On Being Moved by Fiction,' in M. Hjort and S. Laver, *Emotion and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), p. 38.

[13] Such attitudes which produce 'real' experiences will be further explored in the course of this study in comparison to impressions and attitudes evoked by non-literary art and below in 2.3 through exploring reading and writing as self-revelatory processes.

Defining 'fiction' is no more simple a task than to explain what is meant by literature. Lamarque suggests fictional texts can be understood in the following way:

> How things are *described* in a fictive utterance determines how things *are* in the fictional world. This is the connection between fictional content and fictive utterance. It marks a sharp contrast with non-fiction or truth, for *how things are (in the world) is not determined by any kind of utterance*. This deep dependence of the fictional on models of representation is at the heart of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction.[14]

While this argument is seemingly plausible in some ways, the emphasis that Proust's novel places on mediation of primary experience through imagination and memory (as discussed in the previous chapter) prompts us to question the view that the way things are in the world is 'not determined by any kind of utterance'. Indeed, such a limited view on language's ontological potential – viewing it as an instrument for description – would be vehemently refuted by most Proust criticism published since the nineteen-sixties, especially in the French-speaking world. This huge corpus on Proust informed by structuralism and post-structuralism – including the distinguished *œuvre* of Roland Barthes and Gilles Deleuze[15] – regards language not as a means employed by human agency but rather as something which underlies and structures all human experience.

Thus, a wide gulf opens between Lamarque's proposition and the structuralist and poststructuralist tradition that considers reality as entirely constituted by language. From this gulf arises, however, another means to approach the relationship between language and experience: namely, phenomenological hermeneutics. This practice does not refute the possibility that there is meaning in the world without language, but nevertheless stresses that language is an essential condition in *experiencing* this meaning.[16] A view according to which our very basic existence in-the-world (*Dasein*) is inseparable from 'the world' is especially prominent in the philosophy of Heidegger, who emphasised

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[14] Lamarque, *Philosophy of Literature*, p. 185 (emphasis in the original).

[15] See e.g. Barthes, 'Proust et les noms' in *Essais Critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 124-8; Deleuze, *Proust et les signes.*

[16] For example Gadamer holds the view that all human thought is 'language-bound' and therefore language can never simply describe our experience as it is inherent already in the experience itself. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 15. I return to this proposition shortly in section 2.3.

that ‘Being’ and ‘the world’ need to be grasped together, not as distinct entities.[17] Thus the phenomenological tradition refuses, on the one hand, to present the phenomenologically perceptible, material, sensuous world as subservient to language, and, on the other, avoids lapsing back to the idea of language as merely descriptive and secondary.

Lamarque’s definition of the relationship between fiction and non-fiction also becomes problematic regarding the role of the reader, especially if we consider his statements against the phenomenological backdrop. Indeed, we may ask: where does the reader’s interpretation of the text fit in all this? What is the role of the reader in the seemingly neat correlation between a fictive utterance and ‘how things are in the fictional world’? And furthermore, *whose* truths are we talking about? The hermeneutic approach would suggest that the reader, in fact, brings the world (‘how things are in the world’, and how the reader himself is in it) into the experience and makes it an essential part of the experience of the text. Such a process also seems to be the ultimate germ of the Narrator’s proposition of reading ‘en soi-même’ (*RTP IV,* 610). It is with these questions in mind that I now turn to examine the relationship between the writer, the text, and the reader.

2.2. ‘C’est ainsi que j’aurais dû écrire’: Artistic Expression and the Writer-Reader Relationship

In the previous chapter we already touched upon the truth-releasing potential of the writing process in the context of the Martinville passage. In the following, in contrast, I discuss an occasion (one of many) on which the Narrator *fails* to mediate his experience, and, in the light of this example, consider the ways in which the process of reading seems to improve on writing as a self-revelatory experience. Many of the comments that the Narrator makes about the reader-writer relationship, especially at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé,* resound with R. G. Collingwood’s theories expressed in his

[17] Ian Thomson, ‘Heidegger's Aesthetics’, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Autumn 2010 Edition) ed. by Edward N. Zalta <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/> [Last accessed 22 January 2012]

Principles of Art (1983),[18] and I begin this section by briefly examining these parallels, starting with the creation process.

Collingwood states, for example, that 'the expression of emotion is not [something] made to fit an emotion already existing, but is an activity without which the experience of emotion cannot exist'.[19] The idea that expression is what allows the emotion to be *experienced* here is particularly interesting; it also acknowledges that the expression is much more than a mere embodiment of the writer's individual feeling – rather it is a key to experiencing such emotion. If the artist himself is not aware of his emotion until he has expressed it, it seems that the 'knowledge' or understanding of the emotion must lie not in the expression (the text) but indeed in the process of mediation. This idea resonates with the Narrator's exhilarating moment of inspiration caused by the Martinville steeples, after which he feels as if he has 'laid an egg' – released the potential of the experience by approaching it from within and putting it down in writing.

Apart from this instance and the sections where the Narrator discusses the composition of his *oeuvre* at the very end of *Le Temps retrouvé,* however, the Narrator's writerly endeavours tend to be shadowed by a considerable mistrust in his abilities to express in words the sense of 'perpetual adoration' and bewilderment that life throws his way. As mentioned earlier, for the most part of the novel, the Narrator's anxiety over his own artistic abilities prevents him from actually setting to work, and thus we should not necessarily deem the writing process as altogether toilsome merely because the Narrator regards it as such.

There is, however, another example that implies a certain defeatism regarding the possibility of 'accessing' the self or communicating with one's own self through writing: it is manifested, in the form of merciless artistic self-criticism, in Bergotte's death scene in *La Prisonnière,* in which the sick, tired and disillusioned artist has lost

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[18] Surprisingly little has been written on the Proustian features of Collingwood's aesthetics, and indeed it seems odd that Collingwood himself mentions neither Proust nor the *Recherche* in his study, although he, as an early twentieth-century Oxonian, must have at least known *about* Proust's work.

[19] Collingwood, p. 244. Collingwood's discussion of the task of the writer and his relationship with his audience in *The Principles of Art* bears resemblance to some of the views Proust's Narrator expresses in the *Recherche*.

his ability to take pride in his (more recent) works.[20] The overwhelming aesthetic experience in front of Vermeer's *View of Delft*, seeing the miraculous little patch of yellow wall, leads Bergotte to conclude: 'C'est ainsi que j'aurais dû écrire. […] Mes derniers livres sont trop secs, il aurait fallu passer plusieurs couches de couleur, rendre ma phrase en elle-même précieuse, comme ce petit pan de mur jaune.' (*RTP III,* 692) It is almost as if he acknowledges here that the communication with himself has become 'insincere' in his more recent works; having gained popularity amongst wide audiences, he seems to have moved away from his true artistic ambitions and ended up writing works of fiction that seem to yield or reveal nothing to *him*.

It is with this discrepancy in mind that I explore the writing process in the following – a discrepancy between the writing-self and the reading-self, which is present in Bergotte's self-criticism as well as in the passage where the Narrator is reading his own article in *Le Figaro* (which I discuss in 2.3. below). Even if writing seems to, at least momentarily, allow the writer some kind of access to 'truths', the problem with the process of creation (as we saw in the previous chapter) is that like involuntary memory, these ecstatic moments are fleeting and fortuitous. Furthermore, they seem to become denied to the writer himself *after* the creation process is finished and not to be accessed again simply by reading the text. The way in which reading his own text fails to yield the writer the same kind of 'illuminations' as the process of writing did, or as reading a text written by someone else might, seems to further imply that the self-revelatory quality of literary texts resides in the process of making meanings rather than inherently in the text itself.

In Collingwood's approach, one has to view the expression not as something which captures the emotion but as something which, in fact, *releases* it: coherence or the sense of the real can only arise through an internalised process. This is why, subsequently, the text may be regarded as an instrument (rather than a source) for the reader to understand their own 'unmarked' experiences and feelings. Proust's Narrator suggests something very similar, noting how the creation of an artwork is a process in which knowledge or understanding ('le savoir') cannot help us in the process itself but is a reward which

[20] This incident is another manifestation of the inner inconsistencies in the novel, as the Narrator here is, as occasionally with Swann, 'inside' Bergotte's mind as it were, quoting his thoughts.

comes afterwards:

> [L]'écrivain se rend compte que si son rêve d'être un peintre n'était pas réalisable d'une manière consciente et volontaire, il se trouve pourtant avoir été réalisé et que l'écrivain, lui aussi, a fait son carnet de croquis sans le savoir.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 479

Even though the process of expressing an experience can be highly revelatory during the moment of creation, with 'les clochers de Martinville', the Narrator here reminds us of the inability to initiate this kind of process in a 'manière consciente et volontaire'.

A moment similar to the Martinville experience, in which the Narrator feels a compelling urge to 'make sense' of an experience appears, in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs II.* Now in Balbec, the Narrator travels with his grandmother in Mme de Villeparisis's carriage and sees three quivering trees in Hudimesnil. The vision of the trees evokes a profound sense of 'recognition' within him, but this time he is not able to locate the 'original' experience:

> Où les avais-je déjà regardés? Il n'y avait aucun lieu autour de Combray où une allée s'ouvrit ainsi. Le site qu'ils me rappelaient, il n'y avait pas de place pour lui davantage dans la campagne allemande où j'étais allé une année avec ma grand-mère prendre les eaux. Fallait-il croire qu'ils venaient d'années déjà si lointaines de ma vie que le paysage qui les entourait avait été entièrement aboli dans ma mémoire et que comme ces pages qu'on est tout d'un coup ému de retrouver dans un ouvrage qu'on s'imaginait n'avoir jamais lu, ils surnageaient seuls du livre oublié de ma première enfance? [...] Je crus plutôt que c'étaient des fantômes du passé, de chers compagnons de mon enfance, des amis disparus qui invoquaient nos communs souvenirs.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 78

This inexplicable sense of 'realness' and the way it flees from him leads the Narrator to compare the pleasure caused by the trees to the transitory moments of happiness in his life; the Narrator notes how the carriage, taking him further and further from the trees, 'm'entraînait loin de ce que je croyais seul vrai, de ce qui m'eût rendu vraiment heureux' and, in this sense, the experience 'ressemblait à ma vie.' (*RTP II,* 79)

The Narrator tries very hard to direct his thoughts 'dans la direction des arbres, ou

plutôt dans cette direction intérieure au bout de laquelle je les voyais en moi-même' (*RTP II,* 77), but being addressed by Mme de Villeparisis brings his contemplation to a halt. Thus drawn out of his reverie, the Narrator is overtaken by an immense feeling of sadness, 'comme si je venais de perdre un ami, *de mourir moi-même*' (*RTP II,* 79, my emphasis). The scenario of being denied the access to one's own past is once again presented here, and unlike in the Martinville passage, this time the pleasure remains incomplete because of the inability to locate the original experience 'en [s]oi-même'. The absence of a point of reference here seems to prevent the Narrator from actually *mediating* the present moment in light of the past, and thus also from getting 'au bout de [s]on impression' (*RTP I,* 177).[21]

The more the Narrator tries to catch the fleeting past impression, the further away it seems to move, and instead of assisting him, the trees in fact seem to be saying to him: 'ce que tu n'apprends pas de nous aujourd'hui tu ne le sauras jamais' (*RTP II,* 79). The risk of being left forever in doubt, not understanding what lies within oneself, to feel as if one was dead to oneself ('comme si je venais ... de mourir à moi-même' *RTP II,* 79), is a deeply disturbing prospect for the Narrator – it seems, in fact, to be much more disturbing than the inability to understand the other. Indeed, there are moments in which this inaccessibility of the other, even though it causes anxiety in the Narrator, also excites and exhilarates him,[22] and still, it is the prospect of regaining access to one's own past – the experiences that one should be able to call one's own – that ultimately prompts the Narrator to write.

This urge to *relate* to the world and to one's experience through mediation is what Sartre considers as one of the driving forces behind aesthetic expression. The creation process, according to Sartre, begins with the desire to feel essential in relation to something*:*

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[21] The comparison of this unattainable familiarity to the 'paysages' evoked by a book we have forgotten we have read a long time ago is particularly interesting and insinuates that the effects of reading on the reader's mind can be as effective and perserved in the memory as vividly as life experiences. (I shall explore this quality of reading experience further in Part Three of the thesis.)

[22] As Edward Hughes points out, for example, the bewilderment caused by encounters with the young girls in Balbec, as well as the lessons learnt through Elstir's art, contribute essentially to the shift of emphasis in the Narrator's aesthetic quest: the movement from philosophical and 'intellectual' subject matters onto the coding of veritable impressions in life. See Hughes, pp. 106-115 and 179-184.

> Un des principaux motifs de la création artistique est certainement le besoin de nous sentir essentiels par rapport au monde. Cet aspect des champs ou de la mer, cet air de visage que j'ai dévoilés, si je les fixe sur une toile, dans un écrit, en resserrant les rapports, en introduisant de l'ordre là où il ne s'en trouvait pas, en imposant l'unité de l'esprit à la diversité de la chose, j'ai conscience de les produire, c'est-à-dire que je me sens essentiel par rapport à ma création.[23]

What is suggested here is that artistic expression provides the means (for the artist) to endure the 'besoin de se sentir essentiel par rapport au monde'. Sartre makes it clear, however, that in spite of feeling essential in relation to *something*, i.e. our own creation, one is not 'essentiel' to the world through it. This does not mean that we are not really a part of the world – only that we are not in any way essential to it. We are, however, essential to the disclosure ('dévoilement') of the world and of our existence in it, as disclosure always requires consciousness.

The Narrator's urge to mediate the inexplicable pleasure and a sense of realness that overtakes him both in the Martinville passage and with the Hudimesnil trees (as well as in the context of other 'moments bienheureux' in *Combray* and *Le Temps retrouvé*) might be considered as a sign of the 'besoin' Sartre writes about. It is, however, exactly this 'besoin' which also problematises the artistic creation process as a means to arrive at the sense of 'reality' by making it a *motivated* process: the writer is aware of the origins of this process, of the 'primary experience' behind it (the experience which needs to be 'recorded' faithfully), and therefore the end result – the work – remains subject to constant evaluation and re-evaluation by the writer himself, as the example of Bergotte earlier also demonstrates.

The artistic quest on which the Narrator eventually embarks seems to originate in this precise desire to understand life – not by describing it but, indeed, by translating it: 'je m'apercevais que, pour exprimer ces impressions, pour écrire ce livre essentiel, le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n'a pas, dans le sens courant, à l'inventer puisqu'il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire.' (*RTP IV,* 469) This idea of translation also features in Collingwood, who, like Proust's Narrator, suggests that the content, the meaning of an artwork cannot be simply 'installed' there by its creator, but only comes

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[23] Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, p. 90.

to being in some kind of communication with his expression, through the process of reading:

> We […] speak of a work as 'self-expression', persuading ourselves that what makes a poem great is the fact that it 'expresses a great personality', whereas, if self-expression is the order of the day, whatever value we set on such a poem is due to *its expressing not the poet* – what is Shakespeare to us, or we to Shakespeare? – *but ourselves*.[24]

In describing and rejecting such attitudes towards a work of art which often precede the experience of the work itself, Collingwood comes very close to what Proust in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* calls aesthetic 'fetishism' or 'idolatry'[25] – the evaluation and 'appreciation' of a work of art according to its form and origin, rather than the actual *impressions* the work yields to us when we encounter it. In Roger Shattuck's words, 'les célibataires d'art' cannot grasp the fact that 'the domain of art does not exist exclusively or even primarily outside us in great masterpieces […] but rather in our responses to [art], and in our […] attempt to track that response to our inner life.'[26]

While the process of creation may enhance the artist's self-understanding (for example, by making him aware of his emotions when expressing them, as Collingwood suggests), for a writer, accessing this kind of level of self-understanding through his own text later on is problematic because the writer-self is never able to read the text without the knowledge of how it came about. As Sartre points suggests, reading your own text is not really *reading* but always, in a way, re-writing.[27] I now move on to consider the ways in which reading a text written by someone else might be considered as more 'self-revelatory' than writing or reading one's own text.

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[24] Collingwood, p. 316 (my emphasis).

[25] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 130.

[26] Shattuck, *Proust's Way*, pp. 158-9. I shall discuss the 'célibataires d'art' more in Chapter Five in connection to different modes of reading.

[27] Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* p. 54.

2.3. 'Une autre pensée qui se fabrique': Who Reads Whom?

The Narrator plays a kind of double-role in the novel both as a writer and a reader, and through him, Proust also presents us with a situation – described in a passage in *Albertine Disparue* where the Narrator attempts to read his own article in *Le Figaro* – in which the writer faces the difficulty (impossibility even) of simultaneously trying to be both the writer and the reader of his own text. Adam Watt, in his book *Reading in Proust's 'A la recherche',* illustrates the problematic nature of the phenomenology of reading through this very passage. Watt's analysis of the task of reading one's own text as a 'lecteur quelconque' illustrates the importance of the highly subjective dimension that is always required in the process of (genuine) interpretation: the Narrator is not able to read his text through the eyes of 'just any reader', not only because he has written it and thus has a special knowledge about how the text was produced (and thus lacks the essential ingredient of liberty that Sartre attaches to the process), but also because as a 'lecteur quelconque' he now tries to approach the text without any reservoir of personal experiences and thoughts that inhabit every *actual* reader.[28]

Reading his article, the Narrator remarks that while 'la pensée de l'auteur est directement perçue par le lecteur, [...] c'est une autre pensée qui se fabrique dans son esprit' (*RTP IV,* 149). While the idea of 'une autre pensée qui se fabrique' (*RTP IV,* 149) seems to resonate with both the Sartrean demand for freedom and the Barthesian view of language forever in play,[29] to approach the reading experience on such an abstract level – first and foremost as a textual encounter, a *cosa mentale* – contains a risk of overlooking the conditions which individualise the reader's experience and through which the thoughts presented in the text develop into 'une autre pensée' in the first place. If we consider the self-revelatory potential of the reading experience, these conditions – the reader's existence as a psycho-physical being in the world and subject to time – become absolutely crucial.

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[28] See Watt, pp. 50-66.

[29] The emphasis on the reader's role in the process of extracting meaning has been granted to 'la condition essentiellement verbale de la littérature' in which 'la voix [de l'auteur] perd son origine', as Roland Barthes's puts it in landmark essay 'La Mort de l'Auteur' in *Le bruissement de la langue*, pp. 61-67.

While the *Figaro* passage does suggests that a certain distance from the text is required for the reading process to be successful, it does not completely support the Sartrean demand for freedom (of not knowing how the text came about). Namely, the Narrator changes his approach and tries to read his article as himself but to approach the text as if it was written by someone else*,* which, as Watt notes, 'seems to yield far more agreeable results'[30]. The fact that when the Narrator approaches his own text as if it was someone else's creation the text suddenly 'works', suggests that in a successful reading experience, the personal 'reservoir' of experiences of the reader to which he can relate the text is even more important an element than freedom. The Narrator notes how reading as himself 'toutes mes images, toutes mes réflexions, toutes mes épithètes prises en elles-mêmes et sans le souvenir de l'échec qu'elles représentaient pour mes visées, me charmaient par leur éclat, leur imprévu, leur profondeur' (*RTP IV,* 151).

This kind of approach to the text – not with the memory of how it came to being, but with memories and impressions that echo from a deeper, almost unconscious level – allows the words on the page to be faced as more 'éclatés', 'profonds' and most importantly *'imprévus'*. What seems to lie at the bottom of this method is the repelling of voluntary memory and yielding to whatever crops up involuntarily as we read. Watt in fact proposes that the process of reading (for literate people) is *au fond* involuntary in the sense that once we have learnt how to read, we cannot *but* read, and partly because of this kind of habituation, 'reading somehow allows an uninterrupted access to the deeper reaches of the self in a similar fashion, we might say, to the experience of involuntary memory.'[31] When we consider the reader as a being who always remains a part of the material world and exists in time, Watt's comparison becomes particularly convincing:

> Reading, in sum, like involuntary memory, is a powerful transformative process that yokes two entities which maintain the material and the spiritual in tension. On the material level are the book and the body of the reader; on a more ethereal level

[30] Watt, p. 69.

[31] Watt, p. 47. For discussion on the connections between involuntary memory and reading, see also Watt pp. 10, 47-49, 92.

> are the interpretive capacity or 'esprit' housed in the reader's body, and the conceptual, ideational potential, housed in the book.[32]

Once we have learned to read, reading certainly becomes a kind of reflex, and it seems we do indeed also unconsciously (and involuntarily) import some of our preconceptions into the act of reading and thus 'thrust meaning onto words'.[33] However, the act of reading is not involuntary in every respect, and Watt acknowledges this: we *can* choose what to (and what not to) read; we can (and to some extent have to) analyse and interpret what we are reading on a conscious, intellectual level; and we can, after having read something, retrospectively attach our life experiences and thoughts to what we have experienced through the given text. This is what gives the process its epistemic vigour. Furthermore, as the example of the Narrator as the reader of his own text shows, we can – to some extent at least – also choose (and develop) the *mode* in which we read. Facing all the different forms of reception and 'uses' of art in the *Recherche,* we may ask whether the *Recherche* suggests that there are 'correct' ways to experience an artwork, and if so, what defines this correctness.

In *Le Temps retrouvé,* the Narrator does talk about 'une certaine façon pour *bien lire*' (*RTP IV,* 490, my emphasis), but the germ of this 'façon' is not some kind of congruity between the writer's 'intention' and the reader's interpretation. Rather, the idea is that the reader may experience some kind of affinity between the mediated experience of the text and his or her own 'direct' experience in the world. It is this affinity, rather than any particular methodological approach, a set of reading methods, that allows the reader to experience the text as part of himself. However, what is so specific about the aesthetic reading – reading without a particular aim or objective – is that it can also reveal to us, through this 'involuntary' dimension of our imagination drawing endlessly from the reader's own sphere of experience, the way in which *mediation* always comprises a part of the experience in the real.

We only need to consider the Narrator's deliberation in *Le Temps retrouvé* (448-490) where he marks how the writing process can never be 'guaranteed' to reveal truths for

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[32] Watt, p. 49.

[33] Watt, p. 128. I shall discuss the role of such preconceptions, or 'prejudices', as Gadamer calls them, in more detail in Chapter Six. (Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 9).

the one who is writing because 'les idées formées par l'intelligence pure n'ont qu'une vérité logique, une vérité possible, leur élection est arbitraire' (*RTP IV,* 458). It is impression, the Narrator remarks, which provides the writer with the access to truths, but while 'l'impression est pour l'écrivain ce qu'est l'expérimentation pour le savant', the difference is that 'chez le savant le travail de l'intelligence précède et chez l'écrivain vient après' (*RTP IV,* 459). In aesthetic reading, then, the reader's process of decoding the text is similarly filled with impressions drawn from his or her own life experiences, and it seems it is only by suspending the 'travail de l'intelligence' that the reader is able to find those truths which already exist 'en soi-même'. As the Narrator points out, 'non que ces idées que nous formons ne puissent être justes logiquement, mais nous ne savons pas si elles sont vraies' (*RTP IV,* 459) unless we allow our own impressions to animate the text for us.

This takes us back to the problem that the writer faces when reading his own text, and the way there is an 'original' experience attached to the process of mediation, which in a sense provides a point of comparison for a certain 'validity' of the text: for him, the text, even if fictional, does not really allow him to experience it 'du dehors'. In the Hudimesnil passage, the Narrator comments on how the familiarity of the quivering trees (but the simultaneous inability to trace the origins of this familiarity) in fact makes the whole situation feel unreal, 'fictional' all round:

> Je me demandai si toute cette promenade n'était pas une fiction, Balbec un endroit où je n'étais jamais allé que par l'imagination, Mme de Villeparisis un personnage de roman et les trois vieux arbres la réalité qu'on retrouve en levant les yeux de dessus le livre qu'on était en train de lire et qui vous décrivait un milieu dans lequel on avait fini par se croire effectivement transporté.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 77

Here Proust plays with the idea that 'truth is stranger than fiction' and emphasises, through the Narrator's comment, the way in which fictional 'description' in the sense that Lamarque uses it as something which 'normally implies that it is not *true'* can produce or evoke in us the sense of *realness* in the reader.[34] Clearly what the Narrator

[34] Lamarque, *Philosophy of Literature*, p. 175.

experiences in this passage is a sense of the real, but the origins of this sensation remain a mystery which he, unlike in the Martinville passage, is now unable to grasp.

What this passage elucidates is, on the one hand, the importance of imagination in thinking and 'truth-making' in general, and, on the other, the role of direct life experience in the workings of our imagination. In the previous chapter, I already discussed the difference between imagination and fantasy; what was argued was that imagination transcends fantasy, since instead of 'somewhat mechanically generating narrowly banal false pictures', as Murdoch puts it, imagination is a constitutive element *in all our thinking*, always moving us 'toward the expression and elucidation [...] of what is true and deep'.[35]

It is this kind of evocative quality of the experience of art – the way it 'moves' our thoughts by setting our imagination at work – that is essential to experiencing the sense of realness in fiction and to the process of becoming 'un propre lecteur de soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610), rather than 'arriving' at some new truths outside the self.[36] As Lamarque continues, 'to enlarge the imagination is not to add new truths to it but "exercise" it through new applications.'[37] The power of imagination thus resides in its ability to offer us choices which make us acknowledge the multifaceted, processual nature of truth in the first place and help us to 'keep up with it'. This is why an experience of reading a fictional text which is able to evoke the sense of realness in the reader cannot be deemed inferior to the sense of realness arising from life experience simply on the basis that what it says, what it *describes,* is not contingently 'true'.

Gadamer, in his essay on 'Semantics and Hermeneutics', proposes something similar, viewing the process through which a hermeneutical mind can disclose truths as follows:

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[35] Murdoch, p. 321.

[36] Gilles Deleuze also points out how Proust shows how acquiring knowledge or discovering truth does not happen through scrutiny but rather through chance and constraint: 'La vérité n'est jamais le produit d'une bonne volonté préalable, mais *le résultat d'une violence dans la pensée.* Les significations explicites et conventionnelles ne sont jamais profondes; seul est profond le sens tel qu'il est *enveloppé*, tel qu'il est *impliqué* dans un signe exterieur.' *Proust et les signes*, p. 24 (my emphasis). Truth, then, according to this interpretation, is always born out of the movement of thought which can be effectively triggered by the signs of art and innovative ways of representation, such as metaphors.

[37] Lamarque, *Philosophy of Literature*, p. 241.

> The hermeneutically enlightened consciousness seems [...] to establish a higher truth in that it draws itself into its own reflection. Its truth, namely, is that of translation. It is higher because it allows the foreign to become one's own, not by destroying it critically or reproducing it uncritically, but by explicating it within one's own horizons with one's own concepts and thus giving it new validity. Translation allows what is foreign and what is one's own to merge in a new form by defending the point of the other even if it is opposed to one's own view.[38]

Thus, similarly to the Narrator's conviction that writing a literary work can at its best be a translation of life, then reading can be considered as translating the literary text back into life by 'explicating it within one's own horizons with one's own concepts'.

Part of this 'activating' potential of literature is based on the ways in which it is created, mediated and again re-created through the means of language – a system which needs to be, especially in fictive descriptions, 'animated' by the one who uses it. Thus the linguistic aspect of the literary experience – or, indeed, any experience – is by no means inconsequential, since human understanding is intrinsically 'language-bound', as Gadamer notes.[39] However, he proceeds to remark that

> this assertion does not lead us into any kind of linguistic relativism. It is indeed true that we live within a language, but language is not a system of signals that we send off with the aid of a telegraphic key when we enter the office or transmission station. ... [Living within a language] does not constitute linguistic relativism because there is absolutely no captivity in language.[40]

Gadamer's statement that there is no captivity in language is based on the idea that, instead of being confined within one language through which we first conceptualise the world (that is, our mother-tongue), we can acquire new languages, new words, and new concepts, new systems, endlessly, to both match our lived experience and to satisfy our imagination. Thus, Gadamer manages simultaneously to emphasise the hermeneutical conditionality of our being – the significance of the *lived* experience, place, and time in the way we use language – as well as acknowledge the creative and endless possibilities of linguistic mediation in the process of disclosing the direct experience.

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[38] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 94.

[39] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 15.

[40] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 15.

The proposition that the reader can come to possess some knowledge or 'truths' that in fact are in no way proper to the narrative itself seems to represent a somewhat similar situation to the Narrator's 'shift of emphasis' when, with the Hudimesnil trees, he remarks how he directs his thoughts 'dans la direction des arbres, ou plutôt dans cette direction intérieure au bout de laquelle je les voyais en moi-même' (*RTP II,* 77). The text for the reader can be something similar to the trees or the steeples for the Narrator, in holding a potential for disclosure of something outside the object itself. But is this 'something', then, knowledge? Can it be considered as 'truth'?

This prompts us to consider the concept of truth itself and the question of what ultimately gives grounds for it – and indeed, to what extent truth is separable from the way it is experienced and expressed. For example for Heidegger, any 'true knowledge' of the world can only be obtained through personal experience; what this means, in Heidegger's discourse, is that any true recognition of human existence can only be accessed through individuals and therefore cannot be manifested objectively. Heidegger's theory avoids total subjectivism, however, in maintaining, unlike many relativist theories, that there *are* truths in the world – not only to be 'known' but to be *experienced*. As Dermot Moran explains it:

> Human existence is not an entity which is simply there in the world, accessible from different points of view. Rather human existence is some specific person's existence; it has the character of 'specificity' (*Jeweiligkeit)* or 'mineness' (*Jemeinigkeit).* So too an interpretation of human existence cannot be neutral, dispassionate, theoretical contemplation, but must take into account the *involvement* of the enquirer him- or herself in the undertaking. […] Understanding what it is to be a questioner reveals the purely human mode of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein)* as a kind of projective caring and involvement in the world. [41]

To consider Proust's Narrator in the view of this argument, although his involvement in the world cannot be always counted as 'caring', his mode of being in-the-world certainly is that of a questioner.

The tendency of an experience to change dramatically according to how we interpret it at one point in time and another, in the light of new information, is manifested in Proust through several examples of the Narrator's encounters with other people. One such

[41] Moran, pp. 197-8 (emphasis in the original).

instance can be found in the opening scene of *Sodome et Gomorrhe I,* where the Narrator voyeuristically witnesses the encounter between Charlus and Jupien and finally becomes aware of the Baron's homosexuality. The Narrator remarks:

> Les personnes qui n'aiment pas se reporter comme exemples de cette loi aux messieurs de Charlus de leur connaissance, que pendant bien longtemps elles n'avaient pas soupçonnés, jusqu'au jour où, sur la surface unie de l'individu pareil aux autres, sont venus apparaître, tracés en une encre jusque-là invisible, les caractères qui composent le mot cher aux anciens Grecs, n'ont, pour se persuader que le monde qui les entoure leur apparaît d'abord nu, dépouillé de mille ornements qu'il offre à de plus instruits, qu'à se souvenir combien de fois, dans la vie, il leur est arrivé d'être sur le point de commettre une gaffe.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 15

The 'invisible ink' of the motives and the intentions of others recurs everywhere in the Narrator's social encounters – although most of the time (as with Albertine for example) it remains hidden, unreadable.

One of the aspects that make the Narrator's *aesthetic* experiences different is that they allow him to be a questioner without striving to access some 'immediate truth' – a tendency that features heavily in the Narrator's dealings with people, for example. This does not mean that the Narrator's approach to art is simply 'escapist', nor that the soothing quality of these aesthetic experiences is based on somehow suppressing the questioning mode. While the 'specificity' (*Jeweiligkeit)* or 'mineness' (*Jemeinigkeit)* of the other in life seems to remain mostly inaccessible, an artwork may allow us to read the other, to interpret the other, and indeed, to *translate* the other, without the paralysing fixedness of vision or intention which so often characterises interactions with the other in everyday life. In this way, art may help us to take advantage of 'the real power of hermeneutical consciousness [which] is our ability to see what is questionable' rather than to access 'immediate' truths.[42]

The knowledge we extract from literary fiction can thus be described as self-referential in a way – not only in referring to the constant processual nature of language itself but also to that of the reader's ever-evolving subjectivity. The reading of a book as reading

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[42] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 13.

‘en soi-même’ does not mean our subjectivity can be revealed to us as something conceptually clear or controllable through the reading experience, but nor does it mean we are creating it from scratch. Reading is never merely an ‘internal’ process happening in the mind. Rather, the reader is able to move backwards and forwards, with the text, between the imaginary world of the book and the empirically experienced world, his or her everyday life.

In the experience of reading, our imagination is not restricted by direct sensuous impressions drawn from the object of our attention itself (that is, from the text) but in fact sources from outside the object. For example Adam Watt discusses the eminent role of sensory stimuli, such as colours and sounds in the young Narrator’s reading experiences in Combray and how these sensuous impression bind the Narrator to the ‘real’ physical world and to his bodily existence in it, even when his mind is wandering in the fictional world.[43] In this sense the reader never completely ‘loses’ himself in the text but rather enters into a negotiation between imagination and reality – and never just abstract ‘reality’, what is apprehended by our intellect as ‘true’ or ‘actual’ but also the reality experienced through our physical existence in the world. It is through this movement between the two worlds – the phenomenologically experienced world and the fictional world of the text – that the reader’s subjectivity becomes engaged in the reading process.

One special aspect of this kind of ‘in-between’ experience is that it helps us to recognise the role of imagination in all knowledge and construction of meaning and that representation does not merely come after an experience but is always a part of the experience to begin with. Considering the Narrator’s remark that ‘la vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécue … [qui] habite à chaque instant chez tous les hommes aussi bien que chez l’artiste’ (*RTP IV,* 474), it seems that while fictional texts do not embody truths they may indeed *release* them. While fictive utterances determine how things are in the fictional world, they do not prevent the interpretation of the fictive world from drawing from ‘real’ experience or, vice versa, from being projected onto the ‘real’; in this way a fictive utterance may, when correlating with our experience of the real, reveal to us something essential about

[43] Watt, pp. 36-41.

how we perceive the world and ourselves in it. As Lamarque notes elsewhere, the point of reading fiction is 'not that the readers come to grasp propositional truths or acquire new beliefs but that their way of seeing the world has been *affected*'.[44]

Even though this kind of release of truths is not a process that can be completed simply by will and intellect, there is some kind of epistemic drive behind the process which *activates* the reader. In describing his experiences of reading in the Combray garden, the Narrator notes how

> Après cette croyance centrale [en la richesse philosophique, en la beauté du livre que je lisais] qui, pendant ma lecture, exécutait d'incessants mouvements du dedans au dehors, *vers la découverte de la vérité, venaient les émotions que me donnait l'action à laquelle je prenais part* [...] [I]l est vrai que les personnages qu'ils affectaient n'étaient pas *'réels'*, comme disait Françoise. Mais tous les sentiments que nous font éprouver la joie ou l'infortune d'un personnage réel ne se produisent en nous que par l'intermédiaire d'une image de cette joie ou de cette infortune [...]. Un être réel, si profondément que nous sympathisions avec lui, pour une grande part est perçu par nos sens, c'est-à-dire nous reste opaque, offre un poids mort que notre sensibilité ne peut soulever. […] La trouvaille du romancier a été d'avoir l'idée de remplacer [les] parties impénétrables à l'âme par une quantité égale de parties immatérielles, c'est-à-dire que notre âme peut s'assimiler.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 83-84 (my emphasis)

This passage allows us to reflect on the processual nature of truth in Proust. The Narrator's reading process is an epistemic quest, but not aimed at simply becoming aware of something by reading about it; rather, the discovery of truth means actively *taking part.* In reading, this means taking part in a process where meanings are not only created but actually *experienced,* through emotions, memory and imagination.

What is so essentially valuable about reading fiction, according to the Narrator's comments above, is that it enables our soul to assimilate to the experience of the other precisely because in a text the other is not experienced 'par nos sens' (not directly, that is) but by 'notre sensibilité'. The advantage of reading, then, is that it can offer us experiences abstracted from the restraints of the real but not of the reality itself; this is

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[44] Lamarque, *Philosophy of Literature*, p. 240 (my emphasis).

how literature succeeds in describing things as 'réels sans être actuels, idéaux sans être abstraits' (*RTP IV,* 451).

And yet, in order for the reader to assimilate to the 'parties immatérielles', with which the writer replaces '[les] parties impénétrables' of 'un être réel' (*RTP I,* 83), the reader's sympathy and assimilation must find their most rudimentary sources in what has been experienced, interpreted and appropriated before the act of reading, both in life and in other texts and forms of mediation. The actual emotional, sensuous and embodied in-the-world experience (as well as being subject to time) is what enables the reader to 'prendre part', through the 'incessants mouvements du dedans au dehors' (*RTP I,* 83). The Narrator's failure to read as a 'lecteur quelconque' adroitly points to the significance of these dimensions, as the 'lecteur quelconque', as an abstraction lacking a web of experiences in the real, cannot fulfil the reader's task in a satisfactory, profound way.

As already suggested above, the process of reading is, in part, such an active and creative one exactly because it is created, mediated and again re-created through language, which is an abstract system and thus needs to be 'animated' by the one who uses it. In order to test the proposition that the self-revelatory potential of literary experience is related precisely to this process of 'taking part', in which the reader enlivens (even if unconsciously) the fictional text by drawing from his or her own experiences and emotions, we need to consider what a literary text can do differently from, for example, sound or image; with this question in mind, in the next part of the thesis I move on to discuss the experiences of paintings, music and performing arts in comparison with the experience of reading.

PART II

OTHER AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

Music: breath of statues. Perhaps even
silence of pictures. You language where languages
end. You time,
set upright in the grain of hearts' evanescence.

Feelings for whom? O you, transformation
of feelings to what? – to audible landscape.
You stranger: music. You heart-space
grown out beyond us.

– Rainer Maria Rilke, 'To Music' [1]

[1] Rilke, *Selected Poems,* p. 123.

3. 'Cette toile si fixée donnait l'impression la plus fugitive': Reading Paintings

Visual art, and paintings in particular, feature prominently in the *Recherche*, both on the level of its narrative and in recurrent imagery and metaphors throughout the novel. In the introduction to *Paintings in Proust: a Visual Companion to 'In Search of Lost Time',* Eric Karpeles remarks how enthusiasm for visual art – and Impressionist painting in particular – 'seemed to trigger something in Proust's nervous system,' influencing his own work as a writer.[1] Signs of Proust's fervour for Impressionism can be recognised both on the meta-textual level – in Proust's style and the structure of the *Recherche* itself[2] – as well as on the level of the narrative, especially in the discussion evolving around the works of the fictional painter Elstir.

While Proustian ekphrasis [the description and commentary of a work of visual art in literature] has received much critical attention, the way in which the experience of visual art and that of literature relate to one another in the novel has not yet been exhaustively discussed. In this chapter, I analyse the ways in which visual aesthetic experience is presented in Proust's novel and compare the process of 'reading' paintings to that of reading literature, considering different ways in which these experiences may enhance one's grasp of 'la réalité' and contribute to one's self-understanding. The descriptions of looking at Impressionist art in the novel are especially worthwhile in this respect: Elstir's Impressionist paintings are celebrated for their ability to, on the one hand, represent instantaneity and, on the other, reveal the way in which mediation and imagination play a crucial role even in what tends to be regarded as 'pure' (direct) perception.

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[1] Eric Karpeles, *Paintings in Proust:* a Visual Companion to *In Search of Lost Time.* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), p. 20. See also: Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, pp. 12-13, 17.

[2] For example Taeko Uemishi's study *Le Style de Proust et la peinture* (Paris: Sedes, 1988) explores the effects of paintings on Proust's writing style.

One immediate difference between viewing paintings and reading would seem to relate to the way visual artwork engages our senses whereas a text appears in the first instance to trigger the mind. While this is undoubtedly true of the initial stages of the experience, such a perspective – distinguishing the visual and the literary primarily on the basis of one being more connected to our senses and the other to our mental faculties – would not allow the inherent qualities of each experience to be fully explored. Such a point of departure would, first of all, imply that a visual aesthetic experience could not convey meanings or reveal truths beyond its appearance (beyond the surface that is registered by our senses), which is clearly not the case in Proust. Secondly, this kind of approach would undermine the role of the senses in the reading process.[3] While the material aspect of the visual art object does make it inherently different from a book, visuality is what also brings the experience of these different artworks together; visuality, as Proust's novel recurrently reminds us, is not merely connected with our direct, sensory experience but also plays an essential role in the working of our imagination and memory (and vice versa).

In 'Sentiments filiaux d'un parricide,' Proust writes that 'nos yeux ont plus de part qu'on ne croit dans cette exploration active du passé qu'on nomme le souvenir […] les yeux de celui qui fait effort pour se souvenir [deviennent] des téléscopes de l'invisible'.[4] This visual 'genealogy' of memory prompts us to consider the links between the experiences of involuntary memory and visual art – not so much in the sense than the latter would trigger the former but in the sense that the two experiences seem to bear resemblances. This interlinking of memory and visuality also raises the question of to what extent the visual is, in fact, personal, to which I return towards the end of this chapter.

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[3] In its descriptions of the reading process, Proust's novel repeatedly shows how the reader remains a part of the tangible world, sensing it and being affected by it. I shall look at some of these passages and explore the way in which the sensuous experiences feed into the aesthetic experience of a book in Part Three of the thesis.

[4] Marcel Proust, 'Sentiments filiaux d'un parricide' in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (précédé de *Pastiches et mélanges* et suivi de *Essais et articles*) ed. Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1971), pp. 151-52.

The prominence of visual metaphors and visual experiences in the *Recherche* is striking: according to Victor E. Graham, sixty-two percent of the literary imagery in the novel is visual.[5] In addition to paintings, references to photographs, statues, posters and postcards are frequent. Gabrielle Townsend, in her study on the primacy of the visual in Proust, offers a comprehensive examination of the role of visual reproduction and reproductions in Proust's work, discussing the use of photographs as an important narrative device and a source of 'visual instantaneity' in the *Recherche*.[6] In the following, I shall focus explicitly on paintings as the source of visual aesthetic experience. I have chosen to prioritise paintings mainly because they play such an essential role in the Narrator's aesthetic apprenticeship and are therefore discussed in far more detail than other visual works in the novel, but also because there are certain characteristics in paintings which make the onlooker's experience especially interesting from the viewpoint of self-understanding. These aspects include a certain *sui generis* quality of the artwork, an 'auratic distance', and the fact that the canvas as a surface creates a certain position for the onlooker and his or her gaze.

In comparison to three-dimensional visual art, such as sculpture, paintings situate the onlooker in relation to *one* surface, whereas with statues, for example the onlooker is able to perceive the artwork from a variety of angles. The experience of paintings, in comparison to 'everyday' forms of visual presentation (such as the aforementioned reproductions), becomes distinctly different due to a certain uniqueness or 'aura' that surrounds the original work and the artistic craft that has gone into its execution, which is absent from mechanically reproduced photographs, posters or postcards. For now, to acknowledge there are essential differences between the experience of reproductions and *bona fide* artworks is enough for our purposes, as my analysis of Proust's text in the following will focus explicitly on the latter. The question of reproduction will, however, be revisited towards the end of this chapter, when I discuss the role of imagination in the appropriation of visual artworks and literature.

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[5] Victor E. Graham, *The Imagery of Proust.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p. 8.

[6] Gabrielle Townsend, *Proust's Imaginary Museum: Reproductions and Reproduction in A la Recherche du temps perdu* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 15, 17.

We can distinguish at least three major perspectives through which the links between the experiences of visual art and self-understanding can be approached in the discussion evolving around paintings in the *Recherche*. The first type of usage is what initially appears a straightforward analogy between a painting and the 'everyday' world – the world that is familiar to us through our direct experience and through our daily contact with it. The Narrator and Swann especially often comment on the similarity between people or objects they encounter in everyday life and in paintings, and in these passages Proust often refers to identifiable, existing paintings, or at least to a style of an existing painter; I shall call this first type of usage recognition. It is not merely the *visual* resemblance between the painting and a real-life person, landscape or object that is recognised in these instances, however; particularly in the Narrator's case, what seems to be extracted from the painting is a discovery of some psychological truth, an applicable meta-text, or a novel perspective on something familiar.

The second prominent framework in which paintings are discussed in the *Recherche* evolves around the fictional painter Elstir. Visual art features prominently in the Narrator's psychological and aesthetic apprenticeship, and it is Elstir's works in particular that play an important role in revealing to the Narrator the significance of impressions in art. Through the character of Elstir, Proust is able to put his finger on some of the fundamental questions concerning the artist's role, perspective, vision and method of representation. Furthermore, by discussing the Narrator's most personal experiences through these imaginary works of art, Proust is also able to avoid any disaccord between the Narrator's experience and the experience of the actual readers of the novel, which might arise if the Narrator were to discuss existing paintings that the readers would have access to.

The third usage is that of painting as a metaphor – a metaphor which most often refers either to the unattainable beloved whom the Narrator longs to possess or to another place or time where he longs to be. These 'paintings' of the mind are, so to speak, doubly imaginary: they do not exist materially (even at the level of the narrative) but merely figuratively in the Narrator's head. Here, instead of recognition, what the paintings seem to always refer to is otherness – a world that is *inaccessible*

to the onlooker. It would seem that the discussion of visual art in Proust most often relates to experiencing something external or other – be it a place, a person, or a psychological phenomenon recognised outside the self, whereas with literary aesthetic experiences, the emphasis often seems to fall on what lies hidden within ourselves.

3.1. Recognition: Reading Life through Paintings

The very first volume of the *Recherche* includes several instances in which 'real life' is paralleled to paintings. I start with a passage in *Combray* in which the Narrator reflects upon Swann's comment about the likeness of the pregnant kitchen maid to Giotto's *Charity* (*RTP I,* 80). In the context of this comparison, the voice of the adult Narrator intervenes and analyses the childhood experience; the adult Narrator notes how as a child he was not able to appreciate the frescos, the illustrations of which used to hang on the walls of his schoolroom, precisely because of their resemblances to the people he encountered in his everyday life.

The reason why the Narrator initially fails to take pleasure in these frescos is that the characters in them vividly remind him of the inhabitants of Combray rather than sublime symbols of virtues and vices. Later on, however, the Narrator is able to see that the true value of these works of arts is not to be judged according to their symbolic nature in an abstract sense:

> Mais plus tard j'ai compris que l'étrangeté saisissante, la beauté spéciale de ces fresques tenait à la grande place que le symbole y occupait, et que le fait qu'il fût représenté non comme un symbole puisque la pensée symbolisée n'était pas exprimée, mais comme réel, comme effectivement subi ou matériellement manié, donnait à la signification de l'œuvre quelque chose de plus littéral et de plus précis, à son enseignement quelque chose de plus concret et de plus frappant.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 81

In time, the Narrator learns to appreciate the way these symbols are incarnated, and instead of remaining abstract, they become something sublunary [sic], something

'effectivement subi ou matériellement manié'. This passage illustrates the gradual progression of the Narrator's experience of the frescos – from the sensuous visual trigger produced by the surface to a prolonged psychological process of perception – a process through which these symbols are rendered into something 'real'.

As a result, the Narrator is eventually able to recognise the likeness between what the frescos symbolise and the most commonplace scenes of his own life, which makes him acknowledge that there is 'quelque chose de *plus littéral* et de plus précis' in Giotto's treatment of his subject matter. The Narrator's use of the word 'littéral' is interesting here: while this expression may primarily be used here as indicating '[le] sens strict d'une phrase, d'un mot' (as a synonym for 'vraie', 'réel' or 'fidèle'), it is worth considering that Proust's use of a word which also refers to *textuality* might not be accidental here.[7] The same choice of word recurs in the context of Giotto's frescos in *Albertine disparue* when the Narrator travels to Padua to see them: '[D]ans le vol des anges, je retrouvais la même impression d'action effective, littéralement réelle que m'avaient donnée les gestes de la Charité ou de l'Envie.' (*RTP IV,* 227) This small detail, Proust's choice of word here, seems to support the suggestion presented in Chapter Two that language in Proust – and particularly language in art – might have a privileged role in not only accessing but in releasing and appropriating truths.[8]

The Narrator's experience of the frescos shows how marking the visual resemblance between a work of art and 'le réel' is only one stage of the process of 'recognition'. As Gilles Deleuze remarks, when we face a work of art, 'il y a d'autres choses qui nous forcent à penser: *non plus des objets reconnaissables*, mais des choses qui font violence, des signes rencontrés.'[9] The 'étrangeté saisissante' (*RTP I,* 81) of the frescos – and the fact that they initially trigger contradictory feelings in the Narrator – can be regarded as a distinct proof of their true aesthetic value. The Narrator's complex relation to Giotto's frescos also exemplifies the overall struggle to reconcile

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[7] *Larousse dictionnaires français* <www.larousse.com/en/dictionnaires/francais/littéral_littérale_littéraux> [Accessed 10 July 2012].

[8] Further discussion of such qualities of literary language will follow in Part Three.

[9] Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, p. 123 (emphasis in the original).

the real and imaginary in the novel: these experiences become an essential part of his aesthetic apprenticeship, in revealing to him how escapism in art, or art as total abstraction of lived experience, as 'pure imaginary', is always a dead end.[10]

The fact that Swann's opinion, despite his aesthetic expertise, is not enough to convince the young Narrator of the beauty of the frescos is also significant; the revelation of the true value of the frescos has to come to the Narrator *in time*, together with the lessons in human psychology that life offers him:

> Quand, plus tard, j'ai eu l'occasion de rencontrer, au cours de ma vie, dans les couvents par exemple, des incarnations vraiment saintes de la charité active, elles avaient généralement un air allègre, positif, indifférent et brusque de chirurgien pressé, ce visage où ne se lit aucune commisération, aucun attendrissement devant la souffrance humaine, aucune crainte de la heurter, et qui est le visage sans douceur, le visage antipathique et sublime de la vraie bonté.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 81

This is only one of the numerous examples in Proust of how we need to create a personal relationship to a given artwork before we are able to construct the world around us through it. When the Narrator later considers these frescos, he correspondingly finds in reality what he seems to have learned to see through art.

Other examples of 'recognition' include Swann spotting the resemblance of Bloch to Sultan Mahomet II in Bellini's portrait (*RTP I,* 96*)* and the likeness of Odette to Zipporah in Botticelli's fresco (*RTP I,* 219-22). The viewing of Odette as Zipporah bears intense meta-textual and biblical meanings; it has also been suggested that by defining Odette's appearance as 'botticellienne' (*RTP I,* 607), and by keeping a picture of Botticelli's Zipporah on his desk instead of Odette's photograph, Swann satisfies his aesthetic snobbery and justifies his adoration for a woman who 'n'était pas [son] genre' (*RTP I,* 375).[11] While Swann's proclivity for choosing 'art' over

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[10] The whole concept of 'pure imaginary', in fact, seems somewhat contradictory in the light of Proust's novel, which emphasises the role of our lived experience in the workings of imagination and vice versa. We can also consider here the distinction made in Chapter One between imagination and fantasy (pp. 40-41).

[11] See e.g. Townsend, pp. 52-8.

'real' is not always unequivocally clear, it can be considered as a sign of a kind of escapist aestheticism; for example with Odette, Swann does refuse the 'real' Odette and replaces her with the imaginary (Botticelli's Zipporah), which eventually leaves him unsatisfied both in the domain of art and in life.

While Swann can be considered as one of the most influential aesthetic 'mentors' for the Narrator, and while the genuine passion that he has for art never seems to be questioned, his enjoyment of paintings seems to stop at the first level of recognition, after which he considers what he sees in everyday life as kinds of copies of what he has encountered in art or at least 'sieves' the life experience through the aesthetic. Swann thus represents a kind of 'célibataire d'art' (*RTP IV,* 470) in the sense that he seems to use artworks (and paintings in particular) as a framework according to which he rates a life experience as enjoyable or valuable. In Swann's case, the problem is not an apparent, superficial enthusiasm towards art but rather that his enthusiasm is too compelling.[12]

In the course of the *Recherche*, we see how the Narrator, too, starts to formulate and arrange his world through art: art becomes familiar, whereas life becomes more and more perplexing and constantly provides him with strange, new and anxiety-provoking circumstances. One of the Narrator's moments of recognition is described in a passage in *Le Côté de Guermantes II* where Albertine comes to visit the Narrator in his Paris home while his parents are away. In the middle of their budding love scene, Françoise decides it is her duty to play the moral chaperone and abruptly steps into the room. Her excuse is bringing in the lamp, and she is viewed by the Narrator as *'La Justice éclairant le Crime'* (*RTP II*, 655); the Narrator refers here to a painting by Pierre Prud'hon, *La Justice et la Vengeance divine poursuivant le Crime* (1808).[13]

This passage provides a good example of the way the representational qualities of a painting reach beyond visual resemblances: the recognition here is more than recognition of sensuous signs. Indeed, here the dramatic entrance of Françoise

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[12] I shall discuss Swann's aesthetic experiences further in the next chapter in the context of music and 'les célibataires de l'art' (*RTP IV,* 470) in more detail in Chapter Five.

[13] The reason for which Proust misquotes the title of the painting is unclear. See the editorial section in *RTP II,* note 4, p. 1717.

probably reminds the Narrator of the psychological element that Prud'hon's painting captures rather the actual visual resemblance between Françoise and Dike. According to Deleuze, while the sensuous impression is what in the first instance generates the movement of thought and make us strive for truth, the signs of art are 'immatérielles' in the sense that they reach beyond the tangible sensuous dimension of the artwork, referring to 'essences': **'**Les signes sensibles nous forcent à chercher la vérité [et] enfin les signes d'art nous forcent à penser à […] l'essence'.[14] The 'Prud'honian' entrance of Françoise into the room qualifies as one such moment when the Narrator, in fact, recognises the signs of art in life, as the psychological reality of the situation reminds him of his appropriation of the given painting, the way he has come to 'know' it.

This example also shows how the effect that a picture has on us gradually becomes less attached to the actual object (painting) and more entangled with our emotions, thoughts, and ideas. However, the initial visual experience still remains as the steering force in the experience of the painting itself, and thus the viewer always remains, at least for that very instant of looking at the painting, guided by someone else's perspective. Even if this perspective and the sensation that the painting represents are not literally those of the artist, it does preserve the presence of the other in the experience. I now move on to consider this presence through perspective, mainly through looking at Elstir's role in the novel, and to discuss the relationship between the painter, his work and its viewers.

3.2. 'Le laboratoire d'une [...] nouvelle création du monde': Elstir's Art

A significant part of the discussion of visual aesthetic experience in the *Recherche* centres around Proust's fictive painter Elstir and his work. In the following, I examine two episodes in the *Recherche* which demonstrate how the Narrator's relationship with Elstir develops in the course of the novel. The first one depicts the Narrator's first encounter with Elstir in Balbec and the second one the Narrator's experiences at the Guermantes' dinner party where Elstir's art is both physically

[14] Deleuze, *Proust et les Signes*, pp. 51-3, 120.

present (in the Guermantes' collection of Elstir's paintings) and discussed at the dinner table. The relationship between the Narrator and Elstir is also significant because its progression parallels a vaster shift of emphasis in the narrative: the Narrator's movement from the societal to the realm of art.

The friendship with Elstir begins during the Narrator's first visit to Balbec where the painter has his studio. This first 'social' encounter with Elstir takes place in Rivebelle, where the Narrator is dining with Saint-Loup. At one of the tables, they notice 'un dîneur obscur, isolé et retardataire' (*RTP II,* 182) and learn from the 'patron' of the restaurant that the man is, in fact, the famous artist Elstir of whom Swann has often talked. The Narrator and Saint-Loup, excited simply about having this man of repute sitting at a nearby table, write him a note of admiration, without ever having seen any of his paintings. The Narrator admits that their childlike admiration is initially directed to Elstir's fame rather than the artist's work:

> Notre sentiment pouvait avoir pour l'objet l'idée creuse de "un grand artiste", non pas une œuvre qui nous était inconnue. C'était tout au plus l'admiration à vide, le cadre nerveux, l'armature sentimentale d'une admiration sans contenu [...] nous étions encore des enfants.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 183

At first, Elstir ignores them, but when leaving the restaurant he suddenly walks to their table and, because Swann has mentioned the Narrator to him, invites the Narrator (but not Saint-Loup) to visit his studio.

During his first visit to the studio, the Narrator learns that Elstir knows Albertine, which, for the Narrator, enhances the artist's appeal a great deal: the acquaintance with Elstir becomes initially fuelled with another ulterior motive, to get to know 'la petite bande'. At this point, the Narrator is still choosing society over art; however, the other dimension of the relationship with Elstir – the aesthetic dimension – starts to evolve the moment he first encounters the painter's work: '[J]e me sentais parfaitement heureux […] par toutes les études qui étaient autour de moi, je sentais la possibilité de m'élever à une connaissance poétique, féconde en joies,' he states (*RTP II,* 190). This 'pure' intense aesthetic enjoyment and the idea of being able to

develop ‘une connaissance poétique’ through Elstir’s work overtakes the Narrator; what follows is his enthusiastic account of some of the works and sketches in the studio, to which I shall return shortly.

Later in *Le Côté de Guermantes II,* after the Narrator’s return from Balbec to Paris, the clash between aesthetic and societal life is already full-grown. In a passage describing a dinner party at the Guermantes’ house, Elstir’s art is centrally present – both literally, hanging on the walls of the Duc and Duchesse’s ‘cabinet d’Elstir,’ as well as a conversation topic at the dinner table. Before the dinner, the Narrator enjoys the paintings in solitude in the ‘cabinet’, and here the pleasure of aesthetic experience becomes clearly contrasted with the obliging norms of societal life: looking at the paintings, the Narrator completely loses the track of time and, due to his tardiness, the dinner is delayed.

In the course of the evening, the Narrator’s illusions of ‘l’esprit’ of Oriane de Guermantes and the leading elite of the Faubourg Saint-Germain in general is shattered. He is shocked particularly by the utter shallowness of the discussion concerning the reception of art – so much so that, leaving the Guermantes house, the Narrator concludes:‘[Ma] vie intérieure pût se réveiller durant ces heures mondaines où j’habitais mon épiderme, mes cheveux bien coiffés, mon plastron de chemise, c’est-à-dire où je ne pouvais rien éprouver de ce qui était pour moi, dans la vie, le plaisir.’ (*RTP II,* 817)

The dinner party episode thus illustrates the great thematic shift in the *Recherche,* contrasting ‘la nullité de la vie mondaine’ (*RTP II,* 762) and the ‘redemptive’ potential of art. The distinction (and incompatibility, in some sense) between art and societal life becomes particularly clear for the Narrator during the evening, as he experiences some aesthetically intense solitary moments admiring Elstir’s work and the vain and superficial discussion about aesthetic reception at the dinner table, directly one after another.[15] By this point, the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of the Narrator’s

[15] Some examples of the triteness of the Faubourg Saint-Germain elite and their superficial attitude towards art include Oriane’s idea of having a tramway passing all the paintings of Hals in Holland (*RTP II,* 813, 837) and the enthusiasm that Saint-Loup shows towards some books simply in order to impress Rachel (*RTP III,* 95). For further discussion of ‘faulty’ aesthetic reception, see discussion of ‘célibataires de l’art’ (*RTP IV,* 470) in Chapter Five (pp. 156-9).

friendship with Elstir has clearly out-shone the social one: the (internal) disappointments the Narrator experiences in society make him consider the process of *creation* as one (or indeed, perhaps the only) option to flee from the nullity of social life.

Once this incompatibility has been acknowledged, we can hear its echoes throughout the book, for example in the Narrator's remark in *Albertine disparue,* where he notes that 'c'est seulement par la pensée qu'on possède des choses et on ne possède pas un tableau parce qu'on l'a dans sa salle à manger si on ne sait pas le comprendre' (*RTP IV,* 132). However, it must be stressed that the Narrator does not view art as a form of *escape* from the societal scene *per se*; in fact, art for him comes to represent the ultimate means, perhaps indeed the only means, to communicate with the world and genuinely understand its phenomena. Even though it will be through a book that he himself eventually sets out to do this, paintings play a crucial role in the Narrator's revelations of this very potential of art to communicate, to prolong moments and to defy time.

Let us now look more closely at the Narrator's experience of Elstir's works in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs II* and *Le Côté de Guermantes II.* On the one hand, the Narrator considers Elstir's work as 'd'une sorte de nouvelle création du monde' (*RTP II,* 190), and yet, on the other, Elstir's paintings are viewed as deft representations of the world which the Narrator inhabits – he remarks how it seems that 'le peintre n'avait eu qu'à le découvrir, qu'à l'observer, matériellement realisé *déjà dans la nature* et à le *reproduire' (RTP II,* 203, my emphasis). In these occasionally contradictory comments on Elstir's works, Proust's text echoes the fundamental question attached to the painter's expression since Plato: that of whether a painting is a creation of another, entirely new world or a reproduction, a representation of what is already in the world.

This question of creation versus representation in visual art, which manifests itself in the passages describing Elstir's work, parallels the vaster underlying tension in the Narrator's apprenticeship between the 'real' and the imaginary, and the question of whether the aesthetic experience is primary or secondary to life itself. On the one

hand, looking at Elstir's work in the artist's studio, the Narrator suggests that it seems as if the artist has but *reproduced* what nature has already 'materialised' and offered to our senses:

> [cette aquarelle] me causa cette sorte particulière d'enchantement que dispensent des œuvres non seulement d'une exécution délicieuse, mais aussi d'un sujet si singulier et si séduisant que c'est à lui que nous attribuons une partie de leur charme, comme si, ce charme, le peintre n'avait eu qu'à le découvrir, qu'à l'observer, matériellement réalisé déjà dans la nature et à le reproduire.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II*, 203

This comment seems to loudly echo the Platonic notion of Ideas or 'essences' which nature reproduces and art then copies.

However, the Narrator's remark about this 'natural' charm in Elstir's work can also be considered as something more subjective. Indeed, we may ask if this appeal is not more based on the coinciding perspective of the onlooker and the artist than necessarily the artist presenting some universal essences. Some scholars, such as Joshua Landy, view Proust's Narrator essentially as non-Platonist and consider *perspective* as the defining element of a work of art. Landy suggests that 'since in the Proustian approach, an artwork conveys nothing more nor less than the perspective of its maker, what we perceive in it is not the gleam of Platonic ideas.'[16] Such a proposition is supported by another remark by the Narrator, this time describing how Elstir's treatment of a subject matter may help the viewer to 'arrange' visual stimuli the world throws at him or her:

> L'atelier d'Elstir m'apparut comme le laboratoire d'une sorte de nouvelle création du monde, où, du chaos que sont toutes choses que nous voyons, il avait tiré, en les peignant sur divers rectangles de toile qui étaient posés dans tous les sens, ici une vague de la mer écrasant avec colère sur le sable son écume lilas, là un jeune homme en coutil blanc accoudé sur le pont d'un bateau.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 190

[16] Landy, pp. 5-6.

Here, the painting is presented as something which is capable of rearranging the stimuli from the chaotic external world ('le monde') into a composition which allows us to experience them differently and in this sense capable of creating the world anew. Even though the instant visual perception is essential in the appropriation of a painting, the Narrator's words here emphasise once again the idea of how mediation is always a part of any experience; in order to arrive at a meaning, no matter how rudimentary a meaning, the impressions need to 'communicate' with our previous experience to make sense of the 'chaos que sont toutes choses que nous voyons'.

The Narrator, looking at the portrait of young Odette de Crécy in Elstir's studio, proposes that 'le génie artistique [d'Elstir]' in fact originates in 'le pouvoir de dissocier les combinaisons d'atomes et de grouper ceux-ci suivant un ordre absolument contraire, répondant à un autre type' *(RTP II,* 216). Elstir's artistic genius lies in his ability to first see the world 'dispersed', to allow it to be 'open' and then gather and rearrange the 'atoms' into a new order. This new order, then, may open the eyes of the onlooker, allowing them 'les rares moments où l'on voit la nature *telle qu'elle est, poétiquement*' (*RTP II,* 192, my emphasis). This idea that what enables one to truly see how things are in the world is seeing it 'poétiquement' becomes a crucial part of the Narrator's aesthetic credo, based on the significance of impressions on the one hand and, on the other, the potential of art to reveal to us the inseparability of immediate and mediated experience.

While the debate about whether Proust is a Platonist or not is an ongoing one and while I allow it to remain so, I suggest that it is possible to at least partly dismantle this representation/creation controversy by returning once again to the notion of 'la réalité' in Proust, and by acknowledging how reality itself in the *Recherche* is considered as something which can never merely be discovered by searching but always needs to be created as well. In view of the following contemplation, which appears later on in *Le Côté de Guermantes II*, it seems that a painting, particularly an Impressionist painting, can be simultaneously regarded as the creation of something entirely new and a reproduction of something already present 'in the world', to which we can relate through our subjective experience:

> Parmi ces tableaux, quelques-uns de ceux qui semblaient le plus ridicules aux gens du monde m'intéressaient plus que les autres en ce *qu'ils recréaient ces illusions d'optique qui nous prouvent que nous n'identifierions pas les objets si nous ne faisions pas intervenir le raisonnement.* Que de fois en voiture ne découvrons-nous pas une longue rue claire qui commence à quelque mètres de nous, alors que seul devant nous un pan de mur violemment éclairé nous a donné le mirage de la profondeur! Dès lors n'est-il pas logique, non par artifice de symbolisme mais *par retour sincère à la racine même de l'impression*, de représenter une chose par cette autre que dans l'éclair d'une illusion première nous avons prise pour elle? Les surfaces et les volumes sont en réalité indépendants des noms d'objets que notre mémoire leur impose quand nous les avons reconnus.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 712-13 (my emphasis)

The experience of Impressionist painting is particularly appropriate to consider the way in which the meaning, the way a painting 'says' something to the onlooker, comes about not merely through looking at it but 'par retour sincère à la racine même de l'impression', the realisation of how sensuous perception is initially free from meaning and how 'les surfaces et les volumes sont en réalité indépendants des noms d'objets que notre mémoire leur impose quand nous les avons reconnus'.

After the initial impression perceived through our senses, we move on to connect the instantaneous sensory experience to a range of similar experiences we have had, and through the recognition of the links between the new unfamiliar (the art object) and the familiar that is our past experiences. These do not need to be predominantly visual experiences but can also be experiences which have had some psychological impact on us, as we saw earlier in the context of the Narrator's and Swann's 'recognitions'. In this sense the painting, once the process of interpretation begins, then *becomes* a reproduction of something which is familiar to our parameters of experience and to the 'noms d'objets que notre mémoire leur impose quand nous les avons reconnus', while at the same time, creating and changing these parameters, it also becomes a device through which we perceive and construct the world. Thus, this heightened role of impressions is another aspect which seems to, at least partly, absolve the contradictions in the Narrator's statements about the representational and creative qualities of Elstir's work.

The idea that an artwork can affect our perception and 'train' our senses became particularly popular in late nineteenth-century aesthetics and features prominently for example in the writings of Walter Pater and Charles Baudelaire. In *The Decay of Lying*, Oscar Wilde famously remarked that 'at present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects'[17]. Echoes of this manifesto of 'life imitating art' can be heard in some of the Narrator's observations, for example in his remark on how, returning to Balbec for the second time, Elstir's paintings have taught him to see the sea differently: '[M]es yeux instruits par Elstir à retenir précisément les éléments que j'écartais volontairement jadis, contemplaient longuement ce que la première année ils ne savaient pas voir.' (*RTP III,* 179) Thus, it seems that art does not only affect his conscious perception and formulation of the world but also, involuntarily and partly unconsciously, 'trains' his senses. This example also further manifests the intermingling of the immediate and mediated experience in Proust – the interrelation between the sensuous experience and construction of meaning through thought.

Elstir's 'génie artistique' is also related to 'son effort [...] de dissoudre cet agrégat de raisonnements que nous appelons vision' (*RTP II,* 713). This remark and the one on Elstir's ability to present 'la nature telle qu'elle est, poétiquement' (*RTP II,* 192) take us back to the Proustian notion of 'la réalité' as something which is always created and cannot merely be discovered. Elstir, instead of imposing on the canvas a 'fixed' perspective, allows the painting to 'breathe' and 'move' in the processual perception of the onlooker:

> Or celui-ci avait su immortellement arrêter le mouvement des heures à cet instant lumineux où la dame avait eu chaud et avait cessé de danser, où l'arbre était cerné d'un pourtour d'ombre, où les voiles semblaient glisser sur un vernis d'or. Mais justement parce que l'instant pesait sur nous avec tant de force, cette toile si fixée donnait l'impression la plus fugitive, on sentait que la dame allait bientôt s'en retourner, les bateaux disparaître, l'ombre changer de place, la nuit venir, que le plaisir finit, que la vie passe et que les instants, montrés à la fois par tant de lumières qui y voisinent ensemble, ne se retrouvent pas. Je reconnaissais encore un aspect, tout autre il est vrai, de ce qu'est l'instant.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 714

[17] Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 2003), p. 1086.

Here, what in Elstir's Impressionist work is fixed on the canvas is not a 'vision' or a 'perspective' but an impression, capturing the senses of the onlooker and stopping 'le mouvement des heures à cet instant lumineux'. This 'instant lumineux', then, is the moment of seeing the world *without interpreting* it, freed from 'des noms d'objets que notre mémoire leur impose quand nous les avons reconnus' (*RTP II,* 713-4). Looking at the artwork frees us, for a moment, from 'les combinations d'atomes' *(RTP II,* 216), the conceptual arrangement imposed on objects and phenomena by 'le raisonnement'. The counter force of 'raisonnement', then, is *impression*, the 'aspect [...] de ce qu'est l'instant' (*RTP II,* 714).

In discussing the experience of the onlooker, instead of merely focusing on the perspective, it seems more fruitful to consider the *sensation* that the artwork, on the one hand represents and, on the other, produces. In his book *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*, Deleuze remarks that what the term 'sensation' (introduced in the sphere of aesthetics by Cézanne) stands for is something subjective and objective at the same time:

> Cette voie de la Figure, Cézanne lui donne un nom simple: la sensation. La Figure, c'est la forme sensible rapportée à la sensation; elle agit immédiatement sur le système nerveux […] La sensation a une face tournée vers le sujet (le système nerveux, le mouvement vital, "l'instinct", le "tempérament" […]) et une face tournée vers l'objet ("le fait", le lieu, l'événement). Ou plutôt elle n'a pas de faces du tout, *elle est les deux choses indissolublement* […]: *à la fois je deviens dans la sensation et quelque chose arrive par la sensation*, l'un par l'autre, l'un dans l'autre. Et à la limite, c'est *le même corps qui la donne et qui la reçoit*, qui est à la fois objet et sujet. Moi spectateur, je n'éprouve la sensation qu'en entrant dans le tableau, en accédant à l'unité du sentant et du senti.[18]

'La Figure' in painting both represents a sensation and produces one, and a 'sensation' therefore seems to be something more imaginative and more 'open' than perspective, but at the same time it also seems more subjective somehow. This quality of sensation, on the one hand, makes it more transitory and harder to grasp, and yet, on the other hand, it seems to empower the artist and the viewer alike. This

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[18] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation.* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, [1981] 2002), pp. 39-40 (my emphasis).

idea of sensation as the guiding force of the experience, unifying the object and the subject, seems to support the idea that things exist largely in our *experience* of them, and mediation is always a part of this experience.

There is, however, a difference between the Deleuzian, rather complete 'fusion' of subject and the object and the more hermeneutic approach to the 'appropriation' of an object through experience that is emphasised in the present study. Whereas in the Deleuzian view, the object and the subject become '*indissolublement'* united through the sensation, I suggest that in Proust some kind of distinction between the object which is the artwork (and which embodies *something* of its creator) and the onlooker (in whom the art-object evokes the sensation) is still maintained, especially in visual art.

This idea is presented directly in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, where Proust suggests that paintings represent 'une sorte d'apparition d'un coin d'un monde mystérieux' that arises from the imagination of the artist, and the passages describing the experience of visual art in Proust's novel seem to recurrently subscribe to similar views.[19] There is always a certain sense of 'otherness', a sense of inaccessibility, connected to these experiences of looking *at* something – something 'outside the self' – and the visual impression, no matter how powerful and affective, seem to remain 'la plus fugitive' (*RTP II,* 714). These elements of unattainability and otherness in visual artworks become particularly pronounced in the painting-related metaphors that feature in Proust's novel, which I shall discuss next.

3.3. 'Les tableaux de la mémoire': Metaphorical Paintings and the Inaccessible

So far I have approached the representation of paintings in Proust mainly through examining the ways the onlooker relates to a painting (and appropriates the sensations the painting produces through his or her 'reality') and through asking whether a (non-abstract) painting is, in the first instance, a representation or a

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[19] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 669. This idea is used later on in *La Prisonnière* when the Narrator discusses Vinteuil's art and remarks that 'chaque artiste semble ainsi comme le citoyen d'une patrie inconnue, oubliée de lui-même' (*RTP III,* 761).

creation of something entirely new. As we have seen, paintings offer to the Narrator a means to delineate the world around him in various ways: visually (his eyes 'learn' to see with the help of Elstir's work), metaphysically (he sees Elstir's paintings formulating harmonious entities of the chaos of all that we see around us) and psychologically, or at least physiognomically (in the symbolic characters in Giotto's frescos). While the experiences of visual art in Proust are viewed as highly personal and emotive,[20] as well as a means for us to learn to see 'ce que [nos yeux] ne savaient pas voir [autrement]' (*RTP III,* 179), they simultaneously seem to be marked with a certain sense of otherness. This characteristic is illustrated most emphatically in the Proustian metaphors drawing from visual art which repeatedly allude to something inaccessible, something ideal yet simultaneously deceptive and fugitive.

The presence of the other in a visual artwork is explored by Proust also in 'Notes sur le monde mystérieux de Gustave Moreau'. In this essay Proust suggests that a painting preserves some 'fragments' of its maker's perspective and that therefore, when we are looking at a painting by a certain artist, what we see is 'un monde mystérieux dont nous connaissons quelques autres fragments, qui sont les toiles du même artiste'.[21] When we know other works by the artist, we are more likely to pay attention to his or her style and recognise those 'quelques fragments' in the painting we encounter, re-encountering in them the visual imagination of the other (the artist in question). However, Proust goes on to note that the artist himself is not in control of these fragments, but that the creative process for the artist is 'sa patrie véritable, mais où il ne vit que de rares moments' and that artists 'sont des exilés intellectuels; dès qu'ils sont exilés, ils ont perdu du même coup le souvenir de leur patrie et savent seulement qu'ils en ont une, qu'il est plus doux d'y vivre, mais ne savent comment y revenir'.[22]

The idea of 'intellectual exile' here is particularly interesting and it also prompts us to ask what this 'patrie véritable' of the artists actually refers to. We might consider it

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[20] One of the most obvious examples of the affective powers of visual aesthetic experience is undoubtedly Bergotte's death in front of Vermeer's *View of Delft* (*RTP III,* 628-630) which I briefly discussed in the previous chapter.

[21] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 669.

[22] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, pp. 670-72.

as a moment of creation, the moment of experience and mediation blending together – the same kind of state of elevation that is experienced by the Narrator in the Martinville passage with 'ce plaisir, dont l'objet n'était que pressenti, que j'avais à créer moi-même' (*RTP II,* 77). Even though the pleasure is created by the artist himself, it is not accessible by will or intellect. As we saw in Chapter Two, this kind of failure to track the pleasure, not knowing 'comment y [à la patrie véritable] revenir', is depicted in the Hudimesnil passage, in which the Narrator, despite his serious attempts, remains unable to 'locate' the original experience of which the quivering trees remind him. In the light of the further contemplations on the artistic process of creation in the *Recherche*, the idea of artists as 'exilés intellectuels' gains a kind of double-meaning: they are not merely intellectual exiles but also, in a way, *exiled by* intellect.

One visual metaphor in the *Recherche* which uses exactly this kind of sense of fortuity in artistic creation as a parallel to life – to our relationships with other people, in fact – appears in *Le Côté de Guermantes II,* where the Narrator describes the loves of his life – Gilberte, the Duchesse de Guermantes and Albertine – as a series of sketches:

> [Ces] trois femmes que j'avais aimées, je me dis que notre vie sociale est, comme un atelier d'artiste, remplie des ébauches délaissées où nous avions cru un moment pouvoir fixer notre besoin d'un grand amour, mais je ne songeai pas que quelquefois, si l'ébauche n'est pas trop ancienne, il peut arriver que nous la reprenions et que nous en fassions une œuvre toute différente, et peut-être même plus importante que celle que nous avions projetée d'abord.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 684

The Narrator here seems to suggest that even if we in some ways are 'artists' of our life, we are not still entirely in control of the art we produce: we cannot decide or predetermine fully what our 'sketches' eventually turn out to represent.[23] The 'sketches' – 'des ébauches délaissées' – in his 'atelier' (*RTP II,* 684) have, as it were, a mind of their own: they end up representing something completely different than he intended. As we will see later on in the narrative, this is, of course, particularly true

[23] This passage also resonates back to the issue of self-fashioning that was discussed in Chapter One: in view of this passage, we might consider how true self-understanding resembles a 'genuine' artistic creation process, in which the outcome cannot be predetermined, fixed or established 'objectively'.

of Albertine, who at this point still seems potentially 'accessible' to the Narrator, but becomes eternally fugitive in due course.[24]

Of course, the role of desire also needs to be acknowledged here. While these women are here compared to sketches and paintings, they are still fundamentally objects of the Narrator's desire, contributing to the general pattern of desire, anticipation and disappointment that the Narrator follows throughout the novel, in various domains.[25] The very fact that the Narrator here uses the visual creation process as a metaphor in discussing love or desire towards other people – something which engages our senses and our soul but over which we cannot exercise complete power — is telling in its own right. In the same way that we are not entirely in control of our relationships but still very much exist 'in' them (and 'through' them), a part of the 'exiled' painter still remains in his or her 'patrie véritable', through those 'fragments' in his or her work.

The onlooker's desire for the other in visual representation is illustrated even more effectively in the Bois de Boulogne episode – a chronological interval in *Du côté de chez Swann*, describing the Narrator's visit to the (presumably) pre-war Bois.[26] The now middle-aged Narrator is looking at the landscape, with the half-bare trees and the remains of the last leaves of summer, and, observing the 'belles promeneuses*',* missing the elegance of Mme Swann he used to witness and enjoy in his youth. In this passage, the Narrator contemplates 'le manque de la puissance que nous avons perdue de donner de *la réalité* à des choses nouvelles' (*RTP I,* 417, my emphasis),

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[24] In *La Prisonnière,* one of the occurrences that lead the Narrator to suspect Albertine's honesty is related to 'les peintures d'Albertine, touchantes distractions de la captive' which the Narrator admires enough to congratulate her. 'Non, c'est très mauvais, mais je n'ai jamais pris une seule leçon de dessin,' she replies. The Narrator then reminds her that once in Balbec she said that she had been late because of a drawing lesson. 'C'est vrai', Albertine confesses, 'je ne prenais pas de leçons de dessin, je vous ai beaucoup menti au début, cela je reconnais. Mais je ne vous mens plus jamais.' (*RTP III,* 685-6) Here, even though not used metaphorically, paintings become a kind of a symbol of Albertine's lies, and what they reveal to the Narrator is just that: the deceptiveness and unattainability of Albertine. '[J]e savais d'avance que ses aveux seraient de nouveaux mensonges,' he states (*RTP III,* 686).

[25] For example in *La Prisonnière,* the Narrator contemplates this kind of desire towards the unknown and how the attempts of his imagination to conquer spaces and people are eventually annulled by the contact with 'reality': '[C]es similitudes mêmes du désir et du voyage firent que je me promis de serrer un jour d'un peu plus près la nature de cette force invisible mais aussi puissante que les croyances, ou dans le monde physique la pression atmosphérique, qui portait si haut les cités, les femmes, tant que je ne les connaissais pas, et qui se débordait sous elles dès que je les avais approchées, les faisait tomber aussitôt à plat sur le terre à terre de la plus triviale réalité.' (*RTP III,* 677).

[26] There are various calculations and presentations of the chronology of the *Recherche.* (See e.g. Landy, p. 39).

and, at the same time, realises how also the 'reality' of his past seems to be lost forever. The desired other here is the Narrator's own past.

Painting-related imagery plays a key role in the passage, and the Narrator begins by comparing the landscape to an unfinished painting:

> [Ç]à et là, en face des sombres masses lointaines des arbres qui n'avaient pas de feuilles ou qui avaient encore leurs feuilles de l'été, un double rang de marronniers orangés semblait, comme dans un tableau à peine commencé, avoir seul encore été peint par le décorateur qui n'aurait pas mis de couleur sur le reste, et tendait son allée en pleine lumière pour la promenade épisodique de personnages qui ne seraient ajoutés que plus tard. […] On sentait que le Bois n'était pas qu'un bois, qu'il répondait à une destination étrangère à la vie de ses arbres, l'exaltation que j'éprouvais n'était pas causée que par l'admiration de l'automne, mais par un désir.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 414-16

The landscape here is described as a half-finished painting, ready to become a setting for a scene in the story of the promenaders in the Bois. The Narrator's perspective, however, seems to suggest that he himself will not be taking part in whatever scene the painter decides to present, not because he would not want to, but because he *cannot*. Reading on, we see why:

> Ainsi regardais-je les arbres avec une tendresse insatisfaite qui les dépassait et se portait à moi insu vers ce chef-d'œuvre des belles promeneuses qu'ils enferment chaque jour pendant quelques heures. […] Mais forcés depuis tant d'années par une sorte de greffe à vivre en commun avec la femme, ils m'évoquaient la dryade, la belle mondaine rapide et colorée qu'au passage ils couvrent de leurs branches et obligent à ressentir comme eux la puissance de la saison; ils me rappelaient le temps heureux de ma croyante jeunesse quand je venais avidement aux lieux où des chefs-d'œuvre d'élégance féminine se réaliseraient pour quelques instants entre les feuillages inconscients et complices.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 416

The figures in his imaginary painting represent something unattainable; they remind him of the past, of his youth, of lost time – although, as the reader of the *Recherche* is about to find out, even when he was young, hopeful and followed his desire, he felt

forever estranged from the objects of his desire, which in a way doubles the inaccessibility here.

As the night falls and the promenaders leave the park, the Narrator's imagery becomes more sombre and he concludes that 'les tableaux de la mémoire' cannot ever provide us with an access to our past:

> [L]es grands chênes [...] sous leur couronne druidique et avec une majesté dodonéenne semblaient proclamer le vide inhumain de la forêt désaffectée, et m'aidaient à mieux comprendre la contradiction que c'est de chercher dans la réalité les tableaux de la mémoire, auxquels manquerait toujours le charme qui leur vient de la mémoire même et de n'être pas perçus par les sens. La réalité que j'avais connue n'existait plus.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 419

The use of the visual imagery of here is not accidental: the inaccessibility and otherness of the 'toile si fixée' which, nevertheless, gives '[une] impression la plus fugitive' (*RTP II,* 714) connected with paintings also elsewhere in the novel manifests the Narrator's error of trying to, still at this point, reach for the past, 'la réalité qu['il] avai[t] connue' (*RTP I,* 419) *outside himself.* The inability to find 'la réalité' in 'les tableaux de la mémoire' here manifests clearly the Narrator's suspicion of the capacity of mere perception or voluntary memory to yield us access to reality.[27]

However, as mentioned earlier, the Impressionist paintings discussed in the context of Elstir's art in particular seem to offer a different, more optimistic view of the capacities of visual art to approach 'la réalité', attaching visuality and impressions to the workings of involuntary memory. These paintings function as the Narrator's first real guide to the significance of impressions in art, which gradually supersede the demand for intellectual-philosophical focus in the Narrator's aesthetic register.[28] For

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[27] In *Le Temps retrouvé* the Narrator also remarks how reality is never accessible through 'une simple vision cinématographique' (*RTP IV,* 468) which suppresses the 'certain *rapport entre* ces sensations et les souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément' and which we call reality. (I discuss this proposition in Chapter Six, p. 198).

[28] However, rather than simply replacing the 'intellectual' deliberation with the primary, sensuous experience, the Narrator's apprenticeship is based on resisting and eventually dethroning the Cartesian separation of the bodily and sensuous from the mind.

the remaining part of this chapter, let us focus on the role of impressions in the Narrator's apprenticeship.

3.4. 'Cette infaillible proportion de relief et d'omission': the Power of Impression

In *Le Temps retrouvé*, the Narrator compares the process of discovering truths through involuntary memory to the way in which Impressionist paintings affect us:

> Je n'avais pas été chercher les deux pavés inégaux de la cour où j'avais buté. Mais justement la façon fortuite, inévitable, dont la sensation avait été rencontrée, contrôlait la vérité du passé qu'elle ressuscitait, des images qu'elle déclenchait, puisque nous sentons son effort pour remonter vers la lumière, que nous sentons la joie du réel retrouvé. Elle est le contrôle aussi de la vérité de tout le tableau fait d'impressions contemporaines qu'elle ramène à sa suite, avec cette infaillible proportion de lumière et d'ombre, de relief et d'omission, de souvenir et d'oubli que la mémoire ou l'observation conscientes ignoreront toujours.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 457-8

Here, the Impressionist painting is celebrated for its ability to enable us to see things which 'la mémoire ou l'observation conscientes ignoreront toujours'. Objective and conceptualising observation and voluntary memory are once again here viewed as obstacles in experiencing 'la réalité' in its most intrinsic sense, and the passage demonstrates how, when looking at an Impressionist painting, this kind of wilful method in fact becomes insufficient. The Impressionist vision can yield to us 'la joie du réel retrouvé' outside the conscious, conceptualising practices with which we navigate in our everyday life.

In his work, Elstir, as the Narrator points out, does not present 'les choses telles qu'il savait qu'elles étaient' (*RTP II,* 194) but instead, captures in his representation a certain paradox of distance and closeness. The fracturing or the breaking up of the surface that characterises Impressionist art – the removal of the 'glossy exterior' – physically forces the viewer back and also prolongs the experience in time. In doing exactly this, Impressionist painting illuminates the relation between seeing and the

construction of meaning. ‘Cette infaillible proportion de lumière et d’ombre, de relief et d’omission’ in the Impressionist painting compels the onlooker to return, as it were, to the moment of seeing the world without interpreting it and, through this experience, appreciate the role of mediation and imagination as essential parts of making the experience our own.

The Narrator’s experiences of Impressionist works are also extraordinary because of their resemblance to the awakenings of involuntary memory. The similarity of these experiences is based on the way in which an impression is first initiated through the senses and at the same time it occupies the mind like a forceful symbol of something essential and precious to us – something ‘extratemporel’ which ‘avait su immortellement arrêter le mouvement des heures à cet instant lumineux’ (*RTP II,* 714). The connection between the forceful sensuous experience – be it a visual aesthetic experience or a taste – that is triggered by a tangible object seems to simultaneously stop the movement of time and flee from us (*RTP II,* 714). As the Narrator remarks, these impressions cannot be reinstalled by thought or intellect alone, which leaves one feeling that ‘la vie passe et [...] les instants, montrés à la fois par tant de lumières qui y voisinent ensemble, ne se retrouvent pas’ (*RTP II,* 714).

Joshua Landy remarks that intellect, in Proust, succeeds ‘perfectly well in ordinary circumstances’ but is ‘easily corrupted by desire’.[29] Landy lists ‘identifying an acquaintance after a gap of many years’ as an examples of the ‘ordinary circumstances’ in which the intellect may flourish, together with – rather peculiarly – ‘mapping a complicated piece of music’ and ‘deciphering an [Impressionist] painting’.[30] Landy suggests that these instances in the novel represent moments when the state of mind of the subject is not immediately affected by desires and thus capable of ‘intellectual’ thought. One is prompted to ask, however, how many such moments there really are in Proust. Especially in the context of Elstir’s work, the Narrator most certainly is affected by desire – his desire for the young girls in Balbec, but furthermore, throughout the novel, by the desire for artistic creation of his own.

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[29] Landy, p. 10.

[30] Landy, p. 10.

The experience of Impressionist painting and the 'mapping' of Vinteuil's Septet (which I shall discuss in the following chapter) seem not to present 'ordinary' circumstances but rather 'extraordinary' and they most certainly are *not* distinguishable from the Narrator's desires.[31] It is true that the Narrator manages to produce 'intellectual' philosophical remarks of Elstir's work and even describe the mechanism by which they work, but the germ of his philosophical reflection seems to stem precisely from his highly subjective experience, not from somehow detaching himself from it.[32]

In fact, the Narrator's remarks on Elstir's Impressionist paintings in particular (as well as on the psychological reality presented in Giotto's frescos) seem to point to art's capacity to make us see genuinely and resemble the way we truly perceive and come to appropriate things in life – through instant impressions which grow in meaning gradually. The experience of simultaneous closeness and distance (in both time and space) is an essential part of the process of looking at a painting whose surface is 'fractured', and it is precisely this dimension of an aesthetic experience that reveals the inseparability 'de relief et d'omission, de souvenir et d'oubli que la mémoire ou l'observation conscientes ignoreront toujours' (*RTP IV,* 458) and which therefore can never be reached through an intellectual, conceptual, objective approach alone.

This idea of '[la] vision première' superseding the kind of approach in which one imposes the knowledge of 'how things are' on the experience is implied in the Narrator's following remark on Elstir's artistic credo:

> L'effort d'Elstir de ne pas exposer les choses telles qu'il savait qu'elles étaient, mais selon ces illusions optiques dont notre vision première est faite, l'avait précisément amené à mettre en lumière certaines de ces lois de perspective, plus frappantes alors, car l'art était le premier à les dévoiler.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II*, 194

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[31] This is particularly true of the passage where the Narrator discusses Vinteuil's Septet, in which the physically absent Albertine is vividly present in the Narrator's experience.

[32] The passage to which Landy refers in the context of painting is the same one that I have discussed in this chapter: the Narrator's contemplation on Elstir's Impressionist paintings in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs II.*

It is noteworthy here that although Elstir's paintings refuse to impose a perspective on the viewer in the same way that a more visually 'polished' mode of representation might, there is still '[un] effort', a driving force behind the presentation at work in the painting, and through this very 'effort', the artist, too, remains present in the artwork. 'L'effort d'Elstir' is, however, followed by negation ('de *ne pas* exposer les choses telles qu'ils étaient'), which implies that the task of intellect in the creative process is, first and foremost, to make itself scarce.

To return to the viewer's experience, then, and to Landy's claim that intellect succeeds in description of aesthetic experience, the Narrator does manage to describe what Elstir does and the effects his techniques have, but how exactly these 'lois de perspective' trigger 'ces illusions optiques' still remains a mystery (*RTP II,* 194). Furthermore, as we saw in the context of metaphorical paintings – 'les tableaux de la mémoire' (*RTP I,* 419) and 'des ébauches délaissées' of the objects of our desire (*TRP II,* 658) – visual presentation in Proust seems recurrently to evoke a certain sense of inaccessibility, transience and otherness in the viewer. One possible explanation for this is, paradoxically, that in Proust the visual in general tends to be something highly personal. To support this claim we only need to consider the emphasis that is placed on the role of the visual in the workings of memory and imagination (both in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and recurrently in the *Recherche*) and how the Proustian subject is constantly in the process of recreating his or her very own internal visual accompaniment to concepts and phenomena.[33]

My hypothesis is that in Proust, the visual artworks, always remaining to some extent as embodiments of someone else's visual imagination or 'vision' (in the most intrinsic sense), seem to offer the onlooker a glimpse of the other rather than access to his/her own self in the way that for example the reading of literature might. In the experience of a text, the task of 'visual recreation' is issued to the reader, and the artwork requires active 'input' from the reader in order to work aesthetically. The reading process is in this sense, as discussed earlier, an integral part of the very ontology of the literary work, whereas a painting can be aesthetically pleasing simply

[33] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 'Sentiments filiaux d'un parricide' in pp. 150-159 and '*Notes sur le monde mystérieux de Gustave Moreau',* pp. 667-677.

to our senses. While the experience of the visual does not stop at the surface, the surface still *situates* the onlooker outside the painting and thus seems to prevent us from ever entirely 'knowing from within' what the painting represents.[34]

These questions related to the ontology, the 'auratic distance', and the appropriation of the artwork take us back to the difference between the experience of painting and reproductions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. According to Walter Benjamin, the process of reproduction can alter the *sui generis* 'image' of an artwork quite radically, and this is true regarding paintings in particular: 'The reproduction [*Reproduktion*], as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels, differs unmistakably from the *image*. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely entwined in the latter as are transitoriness and repeatability in the former.'[35] In Proust, when discussing existing (that is, non-imaginary) paintings, the Narrator interestingly only describes colours in relation to those paintings that Proust himself had seen first hand, such as Vermeer's *View of Delft,* '[le] petit pan de mur jaune' of which plays rather an essential role in Bergotte's death scene (*RTP III,* 692).[36]

Reproductions do, however, play an important role also in the elaborate, multilayered structure of Proust's work.[37] There are moments in the novel where different kinds of layers of mediation are valued one over another; Johanna Malt remarks how the Narrator's grandmother, for example, prefers many layers of production – a picture of a painting of a landscape – to a more 'realistic' photograph of the landscape, and considers the former more valuable than the latter.[38] Whether this value is primarily aesthetic value is, however, unclear. With the Narrator's grandmother and mother,

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[34] This sense of otherness is, of course, also present in the Narrator's dealings with other people in life; as the Narrator states, we cannot know (or love) other people *except in our thoughts* in real life: 'Les liens entre un être et nous n'existent que dans notre pensée […] L'homme est l'être qui ne peut sortir de soi, qui ne connaît les autre qu'en soi, et, en disant le contraire, ment.' (*RTP IV,* 34).

[35] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 23.

[36] Townsend, p. 62 The lack of colour descriptions in context of those existing paintings Proust had not seen in real life implies a certain desire to remain faithful to the 'authentic' aesthetic experience of the paintings in space and time. When unable to travel to see a given artwork in a gallery, Proust himself did frequently use reproductions of paintings as his source, but most of these were only available in black and white in his time.

[37] Townsend, p. 15.

[38] Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 143.

there always seems to be a certain leaning towards evaluating art from an educational and moral perspective, especially when the young Narrator's education is at issue. In any case, it seems that it is not merely the idea of reproduction *per se* that the grandmother values but 'les épaisseurs d'art' – the multiple layers of artistic processing or mediation which create this aesthetic 'thickness'.

Reproductions can also be considered as a means to remove some of the 'auratic distance' of the original work in question by lessening the role of its material singularity: in a reproduction of a painting, for example, the physical presence of the work (in spatial dimension) is diminished, which may allow the 'ethereal' quality of the artwork to become more emphasised. Gabrielle Townsend takes this more favourable stand on reproductions, suggesting that for Proust himself the reproductions he used as his secondary source did not merely serve a practical purpose 'for the immobile invalid' but that they, in fact, 'represent a stage in the transformation of reality into art' in which 'three dimensions [spatial, mental and temporal] are reduced to two, the physical becomes mental and time is frozen.'[39] In this sense, and contrary to Benjamin's theory, a reproduction can also be considered as a kind of liberation of the true 'image' beyond the canvas.

While on the level of Proust's narrative, tangible objects are of course anything but marginal, the reader of Proust's novel, as Thomas Baldwin remarks, 'is prevented from taking hold fully of the objects of the Proustian world. While we may be tempted by the lure of reproductive closeness, the referential "complications" of Proust's work ensure that a certain auratic distance is maintained.'[40] The same applies to the imaginary artworks in the ekphrastic passages within which the text produces a range of 'sensuous' effects based on the authentic but *imagined* object, which does not have any real materiality. The lack of meticulous descriptions of paintings in the *Recherche* leaves more room for the reader's imagination and creates, quite literally, a certain 'je ne sais quoi' for the reader.

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[39] Townsend, p. 71.

[40] Thomas Baldwin, *The Picture as Spectre in Diderot, Proust and Deleuze* (London: Legenda, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), pp. 82-3.

From whichever viewpoint we choose to consider reproductions, it seems that the experience of reproductions differs from that of original artworks partly because through them, as the auratic distance diminishes, the image becomes more 'adaptable'. In the *Recherche,* we see this kind of adaptation for example in the way Swann keeps a reproduction of the face of Botticelli's Zipporah on his desk instead of Odette's photograph, in this way both justifying to himself his infatuation with Odette as well as making this particular part of Botticelli's fresco his 'own'.

This example of 'appropriation' of Zipporah as Odette leads us back to the relation between the visual and 'la réalité' and the question of to what extent the visual is personal. In *Les Jeunes filles en fleur I*, discussing proper names and how we tend to fill them with associations,[41] the Narrator remarks how

> le monde visible [...] d'ailleurs n'est pas le monde vrai, nos sens ne possédant pas beaucoup plus le don de la ressemblance que l'imagination, si bien que les dessins enfin approximatifs qu'on peut obtenir de la réalité sont au moins aussi différents du monde vu que celui-ci l'était du monde imaginé.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 538

The direct sensory experience, as crucial a role as it plays in Proust, never functions as a source of 'knowledge' but rather as a foundation from which both our imagination and our understanding draw in *creating* and interpreting reality. The Narrator's use of the word 'dessin' is also interesting here and points back to the view the Narrator's grandmother takes that mediation ('les épaisseurs d'art') may present reality to us in a more genuine way than mere 'direct' – that is, unmediated – observation.

The idea that the construction of reality can never happen through primary, direct perception alone but always requires also imagination and mediation is further emphasised in the following remark by the Narrator in *Le Temps retrouvé:*

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[41] I return to this topic later in Chapter Five where I discuss the evocations of a specific author's name by analysing the Narrator's use of the word 'Dostoïevskien'.

> Tant de fois, au cours de ma vie, la réalité m'avait déçu parce que, au moment où je la percevais, mon imagination, qui était mon seul organe pour jouir de la beauté, ne pouvait s'appliquer à elle, en vertu de la loi inévitable qui veut qu'on ne puisse imaginer que ce qui est absent.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 450

While the role of the sensuous 'direct' experience is by no means irrelevant, it is suggested here that *imagination* is, ultimately, the only means to access reality. This paradox will be examined later in Chapter Six, in which I discuss in detail the Narrator's suggestions that 'la réalité' always requires an element of creation while a book needs not to be 'created' but simply discovered, because it always already 'habite à chaque instant chez tous les hommes aussi bien que chez l'artiste' (*RTP IV,* 474).

What is crucial about the above quote in view of the relation between visual and literary experience is the Narrator's remark that 'on ne [peut] imaginer que ce qui est absent' and the grave emphasis on the role of imagination as the 'seul organe pour jouir de la beauté' (*RTP IV,* 450). This suggestion that imagination supersedes direct sensuous experience in the process of creating reality may also further explain why visual presentation in Proust tends to entail a sense of otherness and inaccessibility, while reading (where also the visual is created through the reader's imagination) seems to allow a somehow even more subjective appropriation of the work.

In reading, imagining what is absent becomes an inseparable part of the experience. The task of imagination in reading is not however to *replace* the sensuous but indeed to collaborate with it and to draw from our lived experience (past and present).[42] The reader too, of course, will be 'led' by the narrative and the writer's perspective, but it is the necessity of interpretation – and not merely conscious or intellectual interpretation but interpretation through our own sphere of experience in the absence of direct experience – that makes the reading process so intrinsically personal and the aesthetic experience of a text so properly ours.

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[42] As the Narrator remarks in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs I*, talking about the opposing forces of memory and imagination in his attempts to forget Gilberte, our imagination, even if directed towards the future, infinitely draws from our past experience: 'Il est vrai que cette force que l'imagination dirigeait vers l'avenir, elle la puisait malgré tout dans le passé.' (*RTP I,* 615).

In a sense, the kind of immaterialisation that takes place in reproduction of a painting is what happens at all times with literature, in so far as the words on the page exist, as it were, in a spatio-temporally freer sphere in which each reader needs to 'effectuate' the text themselves, which makes the material dimension quite marginal. However, whereas with visual art, a reproduction always is a copy of the *bona fide* artwork, a copy of a text is never a copy of the literary artwork *per se: w*ith literature, the aesthetic value or 'essence' of the book only becomes available through reading it, through the creative reconstruction of the text in the 'eye' of the reader's mind. Sartre describes this necessity of effectuation by the reader, comparing a book to a spinning top which only exists in movement: 'L'objet littéraire est une étrange toupie qui n'existe qu'en mouvement. Pour la faire surgir, il faut un acte concret qui s'appelle la lecture, et elle ne dure qu'autant que cette lecture peut durer. Hors de là, il n'y a que des tracés noirs sur le papier.'[43] Without the process of reading, the aesthetic qualities of the book also remain closed. In this way, the *bona fide* literary work only exists to (and in) its readers.

The way the literary text is only brought into existence through the reading process prompts us to consider the links between reading and performance, and indeed to what extent reading can be considered *as* a performance. This is one of the questions I address in the next chapter, examining experiences of performing arts, music and drama in the *Recherche,* alongside one crucially distinguishing element of the literary experience which was barely touched upon in this chapter: the role of language in this process of mediation and effectuation.

[43] Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* p. 91.

4. 'Je ne la possédai jamais tout entière': Music and Performance in the *Recherche*

In *La Prisonnière,* playing the Vinteuil Sonata by himself on the piano, the Narrator notes how the music seems different from when he hears it in Albertine's company and how, 'comme le spectre extériorisé pour nous la composition de la lumière, l'harmonie d'un Wagner, la couleur d'un Elstir nous permettent de connaître cette essence qualitative des sensations d'un autre où l'amour pour un autre être ne nous fait pas pénétrer' (*RTP III,* 665). This remark crystallises the Narrator's attitude towards the communicative potential of art and his increasing faith in the potential of aesthetic experiences to allow us to approach the other in the way that mere love or desire for the other person never can.[1] The Narrator does not claim that such experiences would allow us necessarily to know the other *per se* but to know 'une essence qualitative des *sensations* d'un autre'. Noteworthy is also that this 'communication' in music does not actually happen through the listener *trying* to understanding the other but rather because music allows one a 'retour à l'inanalysé' (*RTP III,* 763).

In this chapter I discuss the experience of music and performance in the *Recherche,* with a special emphasis on the communicative potential of these experiences, to which the Narrator repeatedly refers. I explore this potential in comparison with that embodied in the experience of literature – both in the form of performance and as solitary reading. One aspect in which the experience of visual art and music differ from literary communication is that mediation happens (in the first instance) through media other than language. The Narrator's comments on how these experiences nevertheless (or perhaps precisely because language in them is secondary) allow us to see 'l'univers avec les yeux d'un autre' and reveal to us 'ces mondes que nous appelons les individus, et que sans l'art nous ne connaîtrions jamais' (*RTP III,* 762). Vinteuil's music for example, as Edward Hughes points out, 'offers the prospect of real encounter with the

[1] Indeed, most often in Proust love and desire seem to produce false 'knowledge' and distorting suspicion above anything else.

"Inconnue"' in so far as 'in music, the Narrator can touch the web of mystery and still preserve it.'[2] This prompts us to ask whether genuine communication with the other in Proust in fact only becomes possible in the *absence* of linguistic formulation.[3] However, it is also right to ask how exactly the non-verbal experience of music is able to communicate in the first place. Is musical communication, instead of being an exchange of messages or mediating meanings, in fact, something based on simply sharing sensations? Is it communication proper?

Furthermore, it is also worth noting how the experiences of 'non-linguistic' art – Vinteuil's music like Elstir's paintings – in fact steer the Narrator towards the reconfirmation of his own artistic vocation: writing. Already in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs I*, listening to Mme Swann play the Vinteuil Sonata, the Narrator describes his experience as being carried 'par le flot sonore vers les jours […] où [il avait soi-même] désiré d'être un artiste' (*RTP I,* 521). So, while the Narrator repeatedly expresses his doubts about language's ability to communicate, it is this ever-present desire for artistic creation of his own that distinguishes him from Swann for example. Since it is the experiences of art, together with the miracles of involuntary memory, that eventually lead the Narrator to communicate his own 'essence qualitative des sensations' (*RTP III,* 665) in the form a book, his habit of plunging into 'le seul bain de Jouvence' (*RTP III,* 762) through aesthetic experiences (while some of his relationships seem to go horribly wrong simply due to his inability to actually communicate with the other in everyday life) cannot be regarded as mere escapism from the mishaps of his social self.[4]

With visual art, as we saw in the previous chapter, the recipient is always 'positioned' in some way in relation to the canvas, which in turn enhances the prevalence of the auratic distance or inaccessiblility for the onlooker. There is at least one aspect in which music seems to overcome this kind of distancing effect and in this sense improve on visual art

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[2] Hughes, p. 183.

[3] Music as *the* redemptive artform and as a model for a literary work of art in (and for) Proust has been discussed by Peter Dayan and Roger Shattuck. See: Peter Dayan, *Music, Writing, Literature: from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), esp. Chapter Six 'How Music Enables Proust to Write Paradise Lost' (pp. 79-96); and Shattuck, *Proust's Wa*y, esp. pp. 159-60 and 225-31.

[4] Examples of this social miscommunication which will be discussed later in this chapter as well as in Chapter Five in the context of different modes of reading.

as a means to encounter the 'Inconnu', even if its 'messages' remain ambivalent: the fact that music always requires effectuation from the composer's scores. When listening to (especially live) music, the listener is simultaneously sharing the 'perspective' or interpretation of not just one other (as with a painting) but indeed, of multiple 'others' – the composer, possibly a conductor, the musicians as well as (to some extent) also the other members of the audience. However, with a literary text, this kind of effectuation does not result in harmonious 'communication des âmes' (*RTP III,* 762) – quite the contrary, in fact, as we see in the passage describing the Narrator's experience of La Berma's performance, which I analyse at the end of this chapter.

While drama is a genre (and indeed the first genre) of literature, I have chosen to discuss it together with music here, precisely because of the prominence of this performing dimension in both artforms. The differences between a listener's and a spectator's experience of the multiple layers of interpretation within a performance illustrate wonderfully the role of language – its presence or its absence – aesthetic mediation and communication and lead us subtly to the paradox on which I focus in Part Three of the thesis – that of how we can become 'les propres lecteurs de [nous]-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610) through someone else's text.

Another sense in which music differs remarkably from visual art and a (prose) text is the highly time-bound quality of the experience and the heightened role of repetition within it. As the Narrator suggests, listening to Mme Swann play Vinteuil's Sonata (in a passage I discuss shortly), the 'comprehension' of a piece of music is *only* available to us in time, though re-encountering the piece; as the Narrator remarks, 'souvent on n'entend rien, si c'est une musique un peu compliquée qu'on écoute pour la première fois' (*RTP I,* 520). This is partly because music is not referential in the same way as other artforms. In looking at a (representational) painting or reading a text the meaning is somewhat more immediately available.[5] With non-abstract paintings, for example, referentiality is based on, in the first instance at least, visual resemblance, and thus the elements of familiarity are somewhat more readily available because they can be

[5] This is true of prose texts in particular. The experience of poetry, however, seems to bear a closer resemblance to music in the sense that accessing the deeper levels of meaning in poetic form often requires rereading and 'reading between the lines'. As the discussion of poetry is not predominant in Proust, I do not examine it in this study, but I hope to explore the qualities of poetic reading in a future project.

compared to our perception of the empirically experienced world (and other works of art). In music, it is repetition and memory that seem to enable the listener to discover the elements of familiarity and to find a point of reference for the musical concepts and structures *in time*.

Thus, the experience of music is inherently linked to memory, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons why it inspired Proust so much and why it features so prominently in the *Recherche.* The links between the experience of music, memory and selfhood in Proust have attracted much critical attention to date and have recently been discussed by for example Mauro Carbone in his book *Unprecedented Deformation: Marcel Proust and the Sensible Ideas* and James Holden in his *In Search of Vinteuil: Music, Literature and the Self Regained*.[6] My intention is not to recapitulate their findings here, but to approach the experience of music primarily from the listener's viewpoint in order to compare it with the experience of a spectator and a reader of a literary text.

The ways in which Proust himself used the music, musicians and composers he knew as creative models for the musical works and characters within the novel – as well as in the composition of the *Recherche* itself – has also received much critical attention from early on. The real-life model for Vinteuil's music, especially the violin sonata, has been identified with Beethoven, Schumann and Schubert, Claude Debussy, César Franck and Gabriel Fauré.[7] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, William Carter and James Holden among others discuss the role of music in the composition of the book – both the Narrator's book in the narrative and the *Recherche* itself.[8]

In 1913, Proust used a 'théâtrophone', a precursor of the radio, in which performances from theatres, the Opéra, and some concert halls were broadcast periodically. He also

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[6] See Mauro Carbone, *An Unprecedented Deformation: Marcel Proust and the Sensible Ideas,* trans. Niall Keane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), esp. pp. 69-82; and James Holden, *In Search of Vinteuil: Music, Literature and the Self Regained* (Brighton, Portland, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

[7] Discussion about the real life models for Vinteuil can be found for example in Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Proust musicien* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois , 1984), pp.18-21; K. Yoshikawa, "Vinteuil ou la genèse du septuor", *Etudes proustiennes III, Cahiers Marcel Proust* (Paris: Gallimard 1979), pp. 298 and 305; and George D. Painter, *Marcel Proust* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1966) Vol. 2, p. 307.

[8] Nattiez, *passim;* William Carter, *The Proustian Quest* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992), pp. 49, 137-43; Holden, pp. 69-111.

had an automatic piano player installed in the grand piano in his room, to enable him to listen to music when he was too ill to attend concerts regularly. However, the fact that during the last years of the war, Proust used to hire the Poulet string quartet to play for him in his apartment indicates the value Proust gave to live performances and the dissatisfaction of having to rely on mere piano transcriptions.[9] Echoes of the preference for a live performance over a recording can be found in a brief comparison in the beginning of *Noms de pays: le nom*, where the Narrator considers the idea of hearing one's mother's voice played on a gramophone and remarks how it would become estranged and remain inadequate compared to the experience of her real voice and her presence: 'Le beau son de sa voix, isolément reproduit par le phonographe, ne nous consolerait pas d'avoir perdu notre mère'(*RTP I,* 377).

The experiences of music in the novel still take place predominantly in the context of live performances, which makes the multiple layers of interpretation in a musical work more discernible – the layers that the musician(s), sometimes a conductor and also the presence of the other members of the audience add to the experience.[10] Due to the performing context, the experience of music is also always *shared* in Proust's novel, apart from one instance where the Narrator, waiting for Albertine, plays the Vinteuil sonata on the piano by himself (*RTP III,* 664-5). In this context the Narrator notes how the music becomes 'bien différent en cela de la société d'Albertine' and how it helps him to 'descendre *en [s]oi-même,* à y découvrir du nouveau' (*RTP III,* 665). Being both the performer and the listener here seems to make the experience more about *him,* which supports the idea that the presence of the other in the experience of music is partly intertwined into a piece through the multiple layers of the interpretation that we get in a (live) performance.

It is often in the context of a public (or semi-public) musical performance that the Narrator observes and comments on his fellow listeners and depicts the specimen of art-lovers who are not, as Milton Hindus puts it, capable of 'ris[ing] above the rudimentary

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[9] Carter, pp. 137-8.

[10] There are a few scenes in the *Recherche* in which music is heard from a distance and in which the performer and the listener do not share the same space. For example in the Balbec hotel, the Narrator hears someone playing Schumann on the piano in one of the rooms (*RTP III,* 185) and in Paris he hears one of the neighbours performing arias form Massenet's opera *Manon* (*RTP IV*, 35-6).

stage of responding to what may be called the circus-element of art'[11]. And yet, some of what we might call the most intimate aesthetic experiences in the novel, both for the Narrator and Swann, are also described in the context of music. In many ways music seems to give more freedom to the recipient's subjective interpretation than any other art form because it is not strictly representational in nature and seems to allow the absorbed listener a very private experience in the midst of the whole social 'charade', as we shall see shortly in the context of Swann.

In the passages where music is played at home, such as when Albertine plays the pianola (the semi-automatic piano) in the Narrator's apartment, the performance becomes a more private but nevertheless shared experience. Albertine is responsible for choosing what is being played and her selection is done with skill and devotion, as the Narrator remarks: 'Elle choisissait des morceaux ou tout nouveaux ou qu'elle ne m'avait encore joués qu'une fois ou deux, car, commençant à me connaître, elle savait que je n'aimais proposer à mon attention que ce qui m'était encore obscur [...]' (*RTP III,* 874). Here music, even though not selected by the Narrator himself, is selected especially *for* him, which makes this experience slightly different from the spatially and temporally restricted setting of a concert or a matinée and seems to allow the music to respond to and nurture even more effectively the Narrator's desires towards art and Albertine alike.

Before I move on to analyse the passages describing the experience of music in the *Recherche*, it must be noted that musical notation can, of course be considered as a kind of language in its own right and the different variations, 'colours', and techniques in a musical performance can be identified, described and discussed in detail by using notes and musicological terms, which is exactly what musicians and conductors do when assembling a performance. The reading of musical 'language', the system of signification expressed in musical scores, is an expert skill and requires specialised terminology, although – as Daniel Barenboim point out – even 'the most talented musician in the world will not be able to *analyse* [a score] at first sight'.[12] This remark

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[11] Milton Hindus, *A Reader's Guide to Marcel Proust* (Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 253.

[12] It is only after this initial contact that '[the musician] can proceed to an analysis of the piece, work on it, think about it, turn it upside down.' Daniel Barenboim, *Everything is Connected: the Power of Music* (London: Phoenix, 2008), pp. 57-8.

further underlines the role of time and effectuation in the process of music becoming 'meaningful' on which I focus in the following. The methods of musical annotation are thus not directly relevant to my discussion here, as I primarily explore the experience of the *audience* as described in Proust's novel – the experience of listeners who, like myself, are educated but not professional musicians or musicologists themselves.

4.1. 'Comme un être surnaturel et pur qui passe en déroulant son message invisible': Music and Meaning

The first description of a powerful experience of music in the *Recherche* appears in *Un Amour de Swann,* at the soirée Saint-Euverte. Swann is anxious in Odette's absence and wishes to leave but is stopped by M. de Froberville whom Swann has promised to introduce to young Mme de Cambremer. Once this is done, the concert is about to start again, and Swann has to remain seated. In this scene music is at first described almost as a kind of spatio-temporal penitentiary for Swann who feels urged to return to his lover without delay:

> Mais le concert recommença et Swann comprit qu'il ne pourrait pas s'en aller avant la fin de ce nouveau numéro du programme. Il souffrait de rester enfermé au milieu de ces gens dont la bêtise et les ridicules le frappaient d'autant plus douloureusement qu'ignorant son amour, incapables, s'ils l'avaient connu, de s'y intéresser et de faire autre chose que d'en sourire comme un enfantillage ou de le déplorer comme une folie, ils le lui faisaient apparaître sous l'aspect d'un état subjectif qui n'existait que pour lui, dont rien d'extérieur ne lui affirmait la réalité; il souffrait surtout, et au point que même le son des instruments lui donnait envie de crier, de prolonger son exil dans ce lieu où Odette ne viendrait jamais, où personne, où rien ne la connaissait, d'où elle était entièrement absente.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 339

But all of a sudden, through music, Odette appears: when the musicians start to play Vinteuil's Sonata for piano and violin, which Swann has not expected to hear in this context, his mind becomes fully occupied with her. It is 'la petite phrase de la sonate de Vinteuil' – the 'love motif' of their relationship – which makes Odette more prominently 'present' in the room than any of the people surrounding Swann and

renders him a vivid evocation of 'les refrains oubliés du bonheur' – an offering which causes severe pain for the current self:

> Mais tout à coup ce fut comme si elle était entrée, et cette apparition lui fut une si déchirante souffrance qu'il dut porter la main à son cœur. […] Et avant que Swann eût eu le temps de comprendre, et de se dire: 'C'est la petite phrase de la sonate de Vinteuil, n'écoutons pas!' tous ses souvenirs du temps où Odette était éprise de lui […] s'étaient réveillés, et, à tire-d'aile, étaient remontés lui chanter éperdument, sans pitié pour son infortune présente, les refrains oubliés du bonheur.
>
> Au lieu des expressions abstraites 'temps où j'étais heureux','temps où j'étais aimé', qu'il avait souvent prononcées jusque-là et sans trop souffrir, car son intelligence n'y avait enfermé du passé que de prétendus extraits qui n'en conservaient rien, il retrouva tout ce qui de ce bonheur perdu avait fixé à jamais la spécifique et volatile essence; il revit tout [...].
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 339-40

This passage illustrates the time-bound nature of the listener's experience: Swann does not have time to recognise the piece and warn himself of its effects, because the overwhelming memory of Odette grows in intensity synchronically with the movement of the piece: 'l'exaltation où il était d'apercevoir déjà l'objet de son attente qui s'approchait, et avec un effort désespéré pour tâcher de durer jusqu'à son arrivée, de l'accueillir *avant* d'expirer' (*RTP I,* 339, my emphasis). Thus, music here is initially 'recognised' by Swann's senses and (involuntary) memory, before it is recognised by his mind, through intellect, as a work of art with a name and a history of its own – that is, as a work of art existing 'outside' himself. What seems to be suggested here is that when re-encountering a piece of music we first seem to recognise '[une] spécifique et volatile essence' to which our previous experience of the piece is attached and which is the same for our past and present selves. Only after this is our comprehension able to explain this phenomenon by saying: 'I have heard this before.'

In certain respects, this 'volatile' impact that the Sonata has on Swann resembles the awakenings of involuntary memory. Music seems to render to him a piece of the past as something actual, precise and real – offering Swann the means not only to remember but to 'revi[vre] tout' (*RTP I,* 340) – while the abstract linguistic expressions referring to his past seem to be able to transmit mere empty shells of memories, 'prétendus

extraits qui n'en conservaient rien'(*RTP I,* 340). This remark resounds loudly with the passage in *Combray* in which the Narrator, before eating the madeleine, notes that what he remembers of Combray is 'mort pour [lui]' because it is 'fourni seulement par la mémoire volontaire, la mémoire de l'intelligence, et comme les renseignements qu'elle donne sur le passé ne conservent rien de lui, je n'aurais jamais eu envie de songer à ce reste de Combray [autre que 'le décor strictement nécessaire']' (*RTP I,* 43). For the Narrator, the linguistically constructed 'reality' of Combray ('this is how things were when I was young'), evoked by deliberate reminiscing, seems not to yield him anything more than Swann gains through 'des expressions abstraites "temps où j'étais heureux" [ou] "le temps où j'étais aimé' (*RTP I,* 339).

However, there might also be psychological reasons behind these reservations about linguistic expression, especially in Swann's case. Swann's suspicion about language's potential to yield to him anything 'real' from the past might also arise from the fact that expressions like 'temps où j'étais heureux [et] aimé' (*RTP I,* 339) would in fact require, in order to become something else than 'vide', some evidence and explanation of what his happiness consisted in. In other words, the linguistic expression, always issuing him the task of interpretation, threatens to wreck Swann's illusion of his past – for, in view of *Un Amour de Swann,* we may ask if Swann was in fact, even at the time, happy or 'loved' to begin with. Without interpretation and some kind of subjective precision, the representation of the past through words thus also contains a risk of error and fallibility.

As it is possible to conjure up completely imaginary (but simultaneously plausible) things with language, language in Proust functions as a kind of double-bladed sword in relation to memory: as the reality is not conserved in the linguistic representation itself – the use of language as a means to record our memories leaves plenty of room for delusion and also for deliberate obliteration or alteration of certain 'truths' of the past. And yet, language collaborates with memory in an inseparable way, for example in enabling us to express, analyse and represent our past (even though not always accurately) – including things we do not actually remember but which we *know* have existed.[13]

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[13] This is an aspect in which language differs remarkably from the other forms of expression, such as painting or music: linguistic representation always seems to have a some kind of epistemic dimension and be related (either explicitly or implicitly) to what is considered to be 'true', as we saw in Chapter Two.

In *La Prisonnière,* the experience of music is presented as free from such processes and presented by the Narrator as '[un] retour à *l'inanalysé* [...] si enivrant, qu'au sortir de ce paradis, le contact des êtres plus ou moins intelligents me semblait d'une insignifiance extraordinaire' (*RTP III,* 762-3, my emphasis). Swann, on the other hand, does not really seem to be able to completely return to 'l'inanalysé', as his experience is dominated by an excruciating desire for the beloved. This tendency of Swann, already discussed in the context of paintings, to use art to 'justify' some of his life choices resurfaces here: the theme of the Sonata seems to function as some kind of rationale for his pain. However, in some sense the experience of music does pull the analytical rug from under Swann's feet, taking him closer to 'a genuine aesthetic response' and, as Barbara Bucknall suggests, leaving him 'feeling that [the Sonata] has expanded his soul'.[14]

Indeed, it seems that Swann here is very much at the mercy of music. This element of voluptuousness in Swann's experience comes through for example in how the sound of the violin is described as a bird which you can never really catch, 'un être surnaturel et pur qui passe en déroulant son message invisible' (*RTP I,* 342). The 'messages' and meanings in music seem only to be released synchronically with listening to the piece and therefore cannot be fully accessed or predicted, or indeed 'explained', *outside* the experience. This suggests that while the music is able to bring up very specific memories and emotions in the listener, it is clearly not referential in the same way as other art forms. '[Musical] concepts are not expressive of semantic or representational properties', as Kivy notes, and the meanings it carries seem not to be proper to the music itself.[15] While Proust's text points to the extraordinary ability of music to trigger memories and create the sense of familiarity – even recreate scenes from our past and reawaken our past emotions – these are in fact *effects* of music, something which has been associatively attached to it by the listener over time – they are not the 'contents' proper to music.

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[14] Bucknall, p. 79.

[15] Kivy, *Music, Language, and Cognition,* p. 225.

It is not just Swann who relives his past through music; in *La Prisonnière,* the Narrator himself notes how 'rien ne ressemblait plus qu'une belle phrase de Vinteuil à ce plaisir particulier que j'avais quelquefois éprouvé dans ma vie, par exemple […] en buvant une certaine tasse de thé*'* (*RTP III,* 877). Considering how music functions as a powerfully effective mnemonic trigger in this way, there are two questions we are prompted to ask: how does an experience of music differ from and improve on just eating another madeleine dipped in another 'tasse de thé'? And secondly, if there is nothing in the structure or formal properties of a piece of music which ensures what kind of associated content and meaning we attach to it, what is the universality and the communicative potential to which the Narrator keeps referring based on? Before we move on to discuss the communicative dimensions of music, let us consider the first question by exploring the links between music and memory and the role of repetition and time in the listener's appropriation of the piece.

4.2. 'N'a-t-on pas tort de dire "entendre la première fois"': Repetition, Memory, Comprehension

To explore the Narrator's comparison between 'une belle phrase de Vinteuil' and 'ce plaisir particulier que j'avais quelquefois éprouvé […] en buvant une certaine tasse de thé*'* (*RTP III,* 877), we must start by asking on what is this ability of music to carry associations and vivid impressions based? Is it the structure of the work, the 'syntax' of sounds, that allows us to re-access our emotions and impressions with which we have, during the previous times of listening, filled the musical concepts? And how do these concepts differ from the 'substance' of a purely 'sensuous' trigger – like a madeleine dipped in tea?

In other words, we need to ask how music becomes 'meaningful', how it is appropriated by the listener. In a passage in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs I,* where the Narrator is listening to Mme Swann play the Vinteuil Sonata, he contemplates the aesthetic pleasure of music and notes how recognising themes and motifs makes a major difference between the first and subsequent times of listening:

> Mais souvent on n'entend rien, si c'est une musique un peu compliquée qu'on écoute pour la première fois. Et pourtant quand plus tard on m'eut joué deux ou trois fois cette Sonate [de Vinteuil], je me trouvai la connaître parfaitement. *Aussi n'a-t-on pas tort de dire 'entendre la première fois'*. Si l'on n'avait vraiment, comme on l'a cru, rien distingué à la première audition, la deuxième, la troisième seraient autant de premières, et il n'y aurait pas de raison pour qu'on comprît quelque chose de plus à la dixième. Probablement *ce qui fait défaut, la première fois, ce n'est pas la compréhension, mais la mémoire.*
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 520 (my emphasis)

The Narrator seems to suggest here that the first hearing may leave a vivid sense-impression on us which then enables us to 'comprendre' the piece on the subsequent hearings, which then, in turn, may enable us to experience a piece of past and present simultaneously – a possibility to glimpse the 'extra-temporal' self. The 'extratemporal' is what is s*hared* between the self who first heard but did not yet 'comprendre' and the layers of meaning that have been added since and stored in our memory.

The Narrator proceeds to remark how the Vinteuil Sonata, like life, is composed of successive moments which we experience sequentially but are never able to grasp as a whole or to remember as an entirety: 'Pour n'avoir pu aimer qu'en des temps successifs tout ce que m'apportait cette Sonate, je ne la possédai jamais tout entière: elle ressemblait à la vie' (*RTP I,* 521). The way in which music itself is always subject to time thus seems to restrict the experience in some sense: even if the listener has a repeated access to a piece of music – which, in Proust's time, was very rare unless one could play oneself – the effects (the resurfacing of the past self or 'le temps perdu') occur synchronically with the music and are thus only fully accessible through listening – an experience which itself takes time – and *not* through mere remembrance.[16]

While the impossibility of 'possessing' a piece of music in its entirety connects the experience of music to the general anticipation-disappointment pattern of the Narrator, the Narrator goes on to note how the experience of music *improves* on the life experience in one essential aspect: '[M]oins décevants que la vie, ces grands chefs-

[16] It is also worth considering whether this remark about not being able to *possess* the experience has something to do with the experience not being mediated through language. I come back to this question in 4.3 when I explore the communicative potential of music.

d'œuvre ne commencent pas par nous donner ce qu'ils ont de meilleur' (*RTP I,* 521). This remark also links to the idea of how a piece of music, even though the actual experience of it is always 'immediate' and direct, only becomes meaningful to us gradually, *in time.*[17] This process of unraveling a piece of complicated music, as Roger Shattuck puts it, is 'cumulative, subject to time, never exhaustive' and nevertheless

> differs from life in that its greatest rewards come late and not early. The [*Recherche*] itself, we realise, observes this rhythm of delayed revelation. The time needed for gradual initiation to a work of art belongs to and forms part of its experience. An instant does not contain it, though art may contain exalted instants.[18]

Thus, the initial stages of the experience of music – the nebulous and fragmentary impressions which the Narrator celebrates in *La Prisonnière* – play an essential role in the gradual unfolding of the work: these impressions, registered first through our senses, lay a foundation, as it were, of a musical platform for memory.

It is perhaps precisely because the experience of music has both these qualities of happening synchronically, 'in the moment' (and us therefore being unable to 'la posséd[er] jamais tout entière' outside the listening experience) *and* being cumulative and deepening with subsequent hearings, that it seems to be deemed above any other artform in Proust in its capacity to evoke involuntary memory. The experience of music in Proust is described as one which is closely linked to the personal psychological reality of the listener and a certain sense of mystery – something which presents itself not in the form or the content of the artwork but in the *impressions* it evokes.

Thus, 'comprehension' of certain pieces of music in Proust is thus primarily discussed in terms of how the experience allows the listener to reflect his or her own experiences and relationships. And yet, the way these associations are evoked is not completely unrelated to the structure of the piece; as we saw in the example of Swann above, the

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[17] In Proust, the interrelatedness of music and life is implied through several other metaphors as well; if music resembles life in a kind of metaphysical scope, there are also examples of the sounds and experiences of the everyday life identified as music. In *La Prisonnière* for instance, the Narrator marks the resemblances of the cries of a fruit-and-vegetable-seller in the street beneath his window to medieval plainsongs (*RTP III,* 625) and in *Le Temps retrouvé* he notes how the sound of the sirens marking the arrival of the German aeroplanes in the night sky over wartime Paris is 'assez wagnérien' and resembles the screams of the Valkyries (*RTP IV,* 338).

[18] Shattuck, *Proust's Way,* p. 211.

musical ‘syntax’ does somehow seem to frame the experience so that when he re-encounters the piece, that volatile ‘essence qualitative des sensations’ – the ‘inanalysé’ (*RTP III,* 665, 762) which is the same for the present and the past self – may become available to him. While music itself is described as ‘un être *surnaturel et pur* qui passe en déroulant son message invisible’ (*RTP I,* 342), ‘[un] paradis’ (*RTP III,* 763) as well as ‘[un] appel vers une joie superterrestre’ (*RTP III,* 765), the actual experience *of* music in Proust is never entirely ‘abstracted’ from the life of the listener.

In the Narrator’s experience of the Vinteuil Septet, as we shall see shortly, the ability to enjoy the piece more fully already during the first hearing arises from encountering in it the familiar phrase from the Sonata. The ability of the listener to perform this kind of aesthetic ‘mapping’ seems to suggest that music is *not* a mere stimulus but, as Kivy puts it, ‘an object of perception and cognition, which understanding opens up for [...] appreciation.’[19] Although in some senses music does seem to function similarly to a sensuous trigger, both to Swann and the Narrator, it seems that it is its internal structure, its ‘syntax’, that differentiates a musical experience as a mnemonic trigger from a singular punctual ‘inexplicable’ experience, such as a taste. Music represents to us an eloborative organisation of something – a structure within which consecutive and repeated elements (such as leitmotifs) allow us to map, explore and deepen the experience in our re-encounters with the work. As Margaret Topping remarks, it is ‘this model of diversity within unity [...] achieved through the recurrent motifs, the metaphorical networks, which create and extend the artist’s aesthetic vision’ that will later on become the germ of the Narrator’s own artistic work.[20]

The resemblance, then, between the ‘belle phrase de Vinteuil’ and drinking ‘une certaine tasse de thé’ is explained by the Narrator in the following terms:

> Par instants je pensais que cela tenait à ce que ce qui est senti par nous dans la vie ne l’étant pas sous forme d’idées, sa traduction, littéraire, c’est-à-dire intellectuelle, en rend compte, l’explique, l’analyse, mais ne le *recompose* pas comme la musique où les sons semblent prendre l’inflexion de l’être, reproduire cette pointe intérieure et extrême des sensations qui est la partie qui nous donne *cette ivresse spécifique* que nous retrouvons de temps en temps et que, quand nous

[19] Peter Kivy, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 41.

[20] Topping, p. 5.

> disons: 'Quel beau temps ! quel beau soleil!' nous ne faisons nullement connaître au prochain, en qui le même soleil et le même temps éveillent des vibrations toutes différentes.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 876 (my emphasis)

The musical pleasure resembles the 'bonheur' caused by the madeleine dipped in tea, in the sense that it offers the subject access to 'cette pointe intérieure et extrême des sensations' which is shared between the subject in two different points in time and which can only ever be accessed in 'cette ivresse spécifique', in the absence of deliberate attempts.[21]

A literary work, here still unambiguously paired with intellect ('littéraire, c'est-à-dire intellectuelle'), is deemed less capable of recomposing 'cette pointe intérieure et extrême des sensations', and intelligence is considered as a mainly disruptive force in the aesthetic process – something which cannot coexist with 'cette ivresse spécifique que nous retrouvons de temps en temps' (*RTP III,* 876).[22] This leads us to ask what these 'vibrations toutes différentes' the listener can access in fact are, and if music indeed is 'la communication des âmes' (*RTP III,* 763), what exactly is being communicated through it? Music may well be able to recompose 'ce qui est senti par nous dans la vie', but how can the experience of it be appreciated and, furthermore, *appropriated* if it remains in the realm of 'l'inanalysé'? Next, let us turn to examine the Narrator's experience of the Vinteuil Septet, where he implies that music may rise above spoken and written language, and subsequently explore this suggested communicative potential of music in view of the relationship between the Narrator and Albertine.

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[21] However, music does seem to trigger memory in a more 'organised' way than a mere sensuous impression; for example, the Narrator does not experience Venice with every uneven paving stone he stumbles on, even if he is able to recognise the similarity between the two experiences. With music, the familiar motifs and themes follow each other within a structure – a structure which remains the same between the current and the previous times of listening. In this sense, music offers a much more infallible link between one's past and present self than a 'moment bienheureux'.

[22] However, once again it is worth noting that these remarks precede the Narrator's ultimate revelations about embodied time, memory and the nature of 'la réalité' in *Le Temps retrouvé*, which restore his belief in 'translating' life through writing.

4.3. Listening to Vinteuil, 'hearing' Albertine: Music and Communication

So far in this chapter I have considered the essential role that repetition and memory play in making musical meanings 'available' to the listener. In listening to the Vinteuil Sonata played by Mme Swann, the Narrator suggests that understanding a musical work requires the ability to contextualise the piece of music through memory – to say to oneself 'I have heard this before', 'this reminds me of X'. A good example of such a moment of recognition is presented in a passage where the Narrator hears, for the first time, Vinteuil's Septet in a concert; even though this is the first hearing, he is able to 'situate' it due to his familiarity with the composer's earlier work. This passage approaches the musical experience from several different angles. It does not only describe the Narrator's sentiments and reflections on the piece itself but also his observations about the musicians and other members of the audience, recollections of the composer's persona, as well as his anxieties attached to Mlle Vinteuil's friend and her connections to Albertine (*RTP III,* 753-767).

At the beginning of the concert, the Narrator realises he does not recognise the piece that is being performed. He first compares his feelings to those of someone who has just arrived in an unknown land: 'Le concert commença, je ne connaissais pas ce qu'on jouait; je me trouvais en pays inconnu. Où le situer?' (*RTP III,* 753) Then, suddenly, as if he met someone who spoke 'his language', he recognises 'au milieu de cette musique nouvelle [...] en pleine sonate de Vinteuil la petite phrase' (*ibid.*). This revelation gives the Narrator the ability to 'navigate' and underscores once again the idea that the 'accent' of a great artist is unmistakably present in all his works: 'Ma joie de l'avoir retrouvée s'accroissait de l'accent si amicalement connu qu'elle [la petite phrase] prenait pour s'addresser à moi […]. Sa signification, d'ailleurs, n'était cette fois que de me montrer le chemin.' (*RTP III,* 754) This deictic function of 'la petite phrase' seems to further support the view that musical elements do not have a proper meaning as such, but that rather their function is to signal and signpost the listener inside a musical structure.

Here, the Narrator hears Vinteuil's music in what Peter Kivy calls hearing in an 'epistemic' sense: 'when one hears something [...] *as* something [and] takes it to be something. In other words [when] one hears *it* under some description' and the piece of music becomes 'the intentional object of one's conscious state'.[23] The description here is 'I am listening to Vinteuil', and the Narrator arrives at it through recognising 'l'accent si amicalement connu qu'elle [la musique] prenait pour s'adresser à [lui]' (*RTP III,* 753). Because this is the first time the Narrator hears the piece, it seems the familiarity of this 'accent amicalement connu' must here arise from something other than purely personal associations which add 'meanings' to music in time.

As notes are not referential in the same way as words (even though of course the meanings and connotations that words carry are always multiple as well and require interpretation and creative association), meanings in music do not seem to be embedded into the notes in the same semantic way that words carry meanings. However, the sound may take on a specific 'meaning' within a structure (when notes are joined together in a particular order), in a somewhat similar way that the meaning of a word depends on what precedes it and what comes after. In this sense music is 'language-like', as Kivy proposes, in so far that it has a '"syntax" without semantics'.[24] It is this 'syntax', the musical structure in the artwork, that allows our memory to navigate through it on the subsequent times of playing and listening. Kivy suggests that the way we arrive at enjoyment and appreciation of a piece of music is inherently connected to musical structure:

> The enjoyment and appreciation of classical music is concept-laden *and* content-less [...] in that the entertainment of concepts, both consciously and self-consciously [being aware of the self as being conscious about something], on the part of a qualified, attentive listener, is essential to its full enjoyment and appreciation, but the concepts entertained are purely musical concepts ... In other words, the concepts are not expressive of semantic or representational properties.[25]

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[23] Kivy, *Music, Language, and Cognition,* p. 226.

[24] Kivy, *Music, Language, and Cognition,* pp. 216, 222.

[25] Kivy, *Music, Language, and Cognition,* p. 225 (emphasis in the original).

In Proust, this concept-laden and content-less structure of music seems to provide a powerfully effective framework for the listener to experience both something 'universally' heightening and something highly personal at the same time.

We may ask, however, does this kind of 'epistemic' hearing in the context of the Septet mean that the piece is 'appropriated'? The Narrator seems to be able to enjoy the music in a different way because he is able to contextualise it, but does this yet make the Septet itself 'meaningful' to him? The Narrator may be able to analyse the piece during the first hearing here, but only because he is 'hearing it under some description' – that is, his knowledge of the composer's earlier work. Thus, it would seem that the 'description' under which the Septet is heard is, in fact, the Narrator's *appropriation* of the Sonata, the concepts of which he has filled with 'content' during his re-encounter with the work. But if music is concept-laden and content-less to begin with and the musicians playing the piece and the listeners listening to it all 'fill' the concepts with their own subjective associations, it is right to ask what exactly is shared or communicated in a musical experience?[26] The role of music in the relationship between the Narrator and Albertine offers a fertile ground to explore this question.

Although the Narrator is capable of playing the piano himself, he seems to prefer taking the role of a listener. The Narrator often asks Albertine to play for him when they are alone – partly, as Carter suggests, 'as a distraction from his jealous obsession' and partly in order to 'study and better comprehend musical works of which he has only a rudimentary or imperfect knowledge'[27]. With Albertine seated in front of the pianola, the Narrator is able to immerse himself in the piece Albertine is playing and, at the same time, feel the security of Albertine's presence. Although the somewhat mechanical act of playing the pianola does not allow Albertine's interpretation of the music in the same way as playing an actual piano would, what is emphasised in these passages is her capacity to choose the right pieces to suit the Narrator's existing mood, to interpret and musically satisfy the Narrator. Such a selection process represents yet another factor that may contribute to the aesthetic experience of music and adds, in its own way, to the communicative dimension of the experience.

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[26] See Kivy, *Music, Language, and Cognition,* pp. 216, 222.

[27] Carter, p. 138.

As a provider of these experiences, Albertine also plays an important role in the Narrator's aesthetic apprenticeship; as Carter points out, 'Albertine's understanding of [the Narrator's] aesthetic needs proves her superiority over Odette, who is never able to assist Swann in his artistic development'.[28] Whereas Odette's 'transformation' in the course of the novel happens largely through her societal position, Albertine seems to undergo an aesthetic and intellectual apprenticeship of her own. The Narrator notes how during her 'imprisonment', Albertine 'n'était pas frivole, du reste, lisait beaucoup quand elle était seule et me faisait la lecture quand elle était avec moi. Elle était devenue extrêmement intelligente' (*RTP III,* 573). Albertine's increased interest in literature, painting and music and her enhanced aesthetic and intellectual capacities make her, on the one hand, more independent of the Narrator and, on the other hand, seem to enable at least *some* kind of communication and proximity between her and her jealous lover. She even expresses her gratitude to the Narrator for this influence, simultaneously emphasising the transformation that has taken place in her character: 'Je suis épouvantée en pensant que sans vous je serais restée stupide. Ne le niez pas, vous m'avez ouvert un monde d'idées que je ne soupçonnais pas, et le peu que je suis devenue, je ne le dois qu'à vous' (*RTP III,* 573).

This 'aesthetic' communicative dimension is not altogether free from the obsessive jealousy that marks their 'everyday' communication, however. For example in *La Prisonnière,* Vinteuil's Septet, much in the same way that the sonata affects Swann, reminds the Narrator of Albertine's assumed connections to Mlle Vinteuil and her friend: '[J]e cessai de suivre la musique pour me redemander si Albertine avait vu ou non Mlle Vinteuil ces jours-ci, comme on interroge de nouveau une souffrance interne que la distraction vous a fait un moment oublier,' (*RTP III,* 757) he says. Unlike Swann however, even though the suspicions around Albertine's behaviour are never really put to rest, the Narrator's 'plus vaste amour [...], l'amour pour Albertine' is occasionally overcome by his love of art. For example, when Albertine is playing Vinteuil for him, he notes how although 'une seule fois, cette musique de Vinteuil avait été une cause indirecte de jalousie pour moi', he is now able, at least for a moment, to get past his jealousy into the enjoyment of the music itself (*RTP III,* 875).

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[28] Carter, p. 140.

Whereas it seems that Swann seeks the 'other' in artworks in order to dominate and possess them through his aesthetic expertise, the Narrator draws – with paintings as well as music – *metaphorical* links between the artworks and his beloved. Whereas for Swann, la petite phrase is *about* Odette and him, for the Narrator, Vinteuil's music is *like* the Narrator's past loves, all leading towards Albertine:

> J'avais pensé aux autres mondes qu'avait pu créer Vinteuil comme à des univers clos, comme avait été chacun de mes amours; mais, en réalité […] si je considérais maintenant non plus mon amour pour Albertine, mais toute ma vie, mes autres amours n'y avaient été que de minces et timides essais qui préparaient, des appels qui réclamaient ce plus vaste amour… l'amour pour Albertine.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 756-7

It seems that the Narrator is capable of intertwining his own experiences, memories and feelings into the aesthetic experience without harnessing an artwork to serve a certain means like Swann does; Swann's method attempts to embed, capture even, the other (Odette) in his experience, but precisely due to this *intentionality* it does not seem to allow any true communication or be particularly redeeming either. With Albertine, even if Albertine's 'performance' on the pianola does not include her interpretation *per se,* her presence is a part of the Narrator's experience. These moments seem to enable 'communication of souls' on some level, because when playing, Albertine steps, as it were, outside her usual role as an object of desire and takes the Narrator into the space of music, into the 'essence qualitative des sensations d'un autre où l'amour pour un autre être ne nous fait pas pénétrer' (*RTP III,* 665) through music.

In the Septet passage we see how the Narrator is becoming increasingly convinced that obtaining knowledge of the other seems to be possible through art only (here music), as it allows us a 'retour à l'inanalysé' (*RTP III,* 762) through 'cette ivresse spécifique que nous retrouvons de temps en temps' (*RTP III,* 876). However, it is right to ask whether we can talk about communication *per se* in the case of Albertine and the Narrator. While they do share the musical universe during Albertine's performance, this does not enable communication proper because the Narrator, instead of listening to Albertine, seems only ever to be *hearing* her. What he actually listens to and accesses through the music, is once again his own associations and reflections on their relationship.

The question arises whether the Narrator's preferences to 'communicate' with Albertine through music have something to do with his inability to actually communicate with her in everyday life, through language, and furthermore, whether this inability is connected, as was suggested with Swann earlier, to some unwillingness to tackle the 'interpretative' and truth-related dimensions so inherent in linguistic expression. Earlier in *La Prisonnière,* the Narrator laments over Albertine's changed, now cautious and evasive speech, which leaves him no other alternative than to interpret her by what she does *not* say:

> J'en étais arrivé à ne plus attacher […] d'importance qu'aux témoignages qui ne sont pas une expression rationnelle et analytique de la vérité; les paroles elles-mêmes ne me renseignaient qu'à *la condition d'être interprétées* à la façon d'un afflux de sang à la figure d'une personne qui se trouble, à la façon encore d'un silence subit. […] Parfois l'écriture où je déchiffrais les mensonges d'Albertine, sans être idéographique, avait simplement besoin d'être lue à rebours.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 596-8 (my emphasis)

The Narrator starts to decode Albertine's utterances, even when they are not 'idiomatic', as if they were symbolic language which requires to be read 'à rebours'. What links this passage to the communication through music is the way the Narrator then compares the sound of Albertine breathing in her sleep to music, which creates another kind of scene of not-speaking, very different from her silence in the conversations they have. The sound of her breath allows the sense of genuine presence, unlike a chosen silence or a chosen expression when she is awake. The sound of her breathing, which 'n'a l'épaisseur ni de la parole ni du silence' (*RTP III,* 621), is described as music which becomes 'non pas seulement matériellement mais moralement […] le pur chant des Anges' (*RTP III,* 621). What seems to be implied here, through the Narrator's metaphor, is that music (in the sense of not having 'semantics') is not capable of lying, not at least in the same sense as linguistic expression.

This quality might be partly explained by the way in which ambiguities and even contradictions can co-exist in harmony in music. One of the aspects from which the difference between musical and linguistic expressions can be approached, is exactly the degree to which they tolerate ambiguity. The way in which musical concepts are free

from referentiality that would *aim* at representation, and in this sense also remain without any kind of epistemic point of reference, may partly explain why music, as the Narrator later implies, can be considered as 'la communication des âmes' (*RTP III,* 672) – allowing multiple highly subjective interpretations to coexist simultaneously. As Daniel Barenboim notes, in music, unlike often in language, ambiguity does not lead to confusion:

> In life outside music, ambiguity is not necessarily a positive attribute – it is often a sign of indecision [...] – but in the world of sound, ambiguity becomes a virtue by offering many different possibilities from which to proceed. Sound has the ability to make a link between all elements, so that no element is exclusively negative or positive. Through music, in fact, even suffering can be pleasurable. [...] In music [....] joy and sorrow exist simultaneously and therefore allow us to feel a sense of harmony.[29]

Literary language is of course different from everyday communication, but even a fictional or poetic text cannot escape the fact that 'a book is full of the same words that are used every day, day after day, to explain, describe, demand, argue, beg, enthuse, tell the truth and lie.'[30]

The soothing sound of Albertine sleeping is occasionally disrupted when she talks in her sleep. The Narrator's comment elucidates even further his suspicion towards the possibility of communicating with her through words: 'Parfois même à cette musique, *la voix humaine* s'ajoutait. *Albertine prononçait quelque mots*. Comme j'aurais voulu en saisir le sens!' (*RTP III,* 621, my emphasis) The sound shifts from 'le pur chant des Anges' to 'la voix humaine', and *words* interrupt the 'communication of souls' between the Narrator and his beloved by issuing him with the incessant task of interpretation. This example also points to the 'double-edged sword' quality of language and to the way it is, for the human mind, the ultimate means to construct and understand things from one's own perspective – exactly because it issues one with the task of interpretation. What seems to be implied here once again is that language is never merely a means to mediate an experience or 'make sense' of it, but an integral part of the experience.

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[29] Barenboim, pp. 19-20 (my emphasis).

[30] Barenboim, p. 3. I shall return to the specificity of literary expression later on in this chapter and further explore how it differs from 'everyday language' in Chapter Five.

There are several references in Proust, as we saw above, to a certain ambiguity and supernatural quality in musical 'messages', which allow us to share something in the space of 'l'inanalysé' (*RTP III,* 763). This takes us back to the question of what is being appropriated in the experience of (instrumental) music and is this appropriation in fact even possible without some kind of linguistic mediation? As mentioned earlier, music can of course also be considered as a 'language' in its own right, a system of signifiers, and a score can be approached as a 'text' written in notes, which then needs to be 'translated' by someone who knows how to read them and performed by an artist for a non-musician to grasp. The fact that a piece always needs to be *effectuated* from its original form (the composer's scores), makes music, in this sense, always a mediated experience to begin with, and thus also a *shared* one: what we hear when we listen to a piece is always already someone else's interpretation of the composer's work. This process in which (each) musician appropriates the piece when rehearsing and playing, and each listener does the same when listening, results in the co-existence of multiple layers of interpretation within the experience.

The Septet passage emphasises the role of the performers who partake in the vital process of 'translating' the piece from scores into music and make it available for the audience. Having so far considered the Sonata for piano and violin as the only known piece of Vinteuil, the Narrator now learns that the new piece that is being played (the Septet) has been discovered and rendered into an intelligible form from the composer's 'indéchiffrables' scores by 'la seule personne qui avait assez vécu auprès de Vinteuil pour bien connaître sa manière de travailler, pour deviner ses indications d'orchestre: l'amie de Mlle Vinteuil' (*RTP III,* 765). Until now, Mlle Vinteuil's friend has, in the Narrator's mind, been solely attached to the traumatising Montjouvain scene and to the anxiety over her (possible) friendship with Albertine. Now, however, she is granted the role of a translator – and moreover, of a saviour – of the late Vinteuil's scores.[31]

This skill of Mlle Vinteuil's friend allows the Narrator to think of her, for the first time, as not entirely corrupted, and, in this sense, art here functions as a form of redemption.

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[31] The Narrator's reflections on Mlle Vinteuil in this new context are beautifully analysed by Adam Watt. See Watt, pp. 83-7.

The same applies to the Narrator's comments on Morel, whose role is acclaimed in making his enjoyment of the Septet so intense, with a certain 'qualité morale et supériorité intellectuelle' which never seems to characterise his behaviour in life but which is present in the music when he plays:

> Morel avait beau jouer merveilleusement, les sons que rendait son violon me parurent singulièrement perçants, presque criards. Cette âcreté plaisait et, comme dans certaines voix, on y sentait une sorte de qualité morale et de supériorité intellectuelle. Mais cela pouvait choquer. Quand la vision de l'univers se modifie, s'épure, devient plus adéquate au souvenir de la patrie intérieure, il est bien naturel que cela se traduise par une altération générale des sonorités chez le musicien comme de la couleur chez le peintre.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 761

Acknowledging the layers of interpretation that the musicians bring to the piece they are playing as an essential quality of the artwork and paralleling the musicians to painters, this passage presents performance as an act of creation rather than just mere mediation. As Charlus states at one point, 'instructing' Morel with the Fifteenth Quartet (assumedly by Beethoven): "Il faut jouer ça comme si vous le composiez" (*RTP III,* 398).

These comments emphasise the idea that there are multiple layers not merely of interpretation but creation even that co-exist in music already when it first reaches the listener. Each of these different efforts that have gone into making the piece available for the audience add a layer of interpretation to it, and in this sense the piece does indeed become 'la communication des âmes' (*RTP III,* 763). The live music situation of course makes the layers of interpretation within the piece even more discernible. Listening to Vinteuil's Septet, the Narrator seems to experience a sense of calm and some kind of mutual understanding in the presence of the other listeners, as if he was suddenly allowed to glimpse the 'essence qualitative de sensations d'une autre' – something he feels he could never obtain in conversation:

> Des personnes plus agréables causèrent un moment avec moi. Mais qu'étaient *leurs paroles, qui, comme toute parole humaine extérieure, me laissaient si indifférent,* à côté de la céleste phrase musicale avec laquelle je venais de m'entretenir? [...] [J]e me demandais si la musique n'était pas l'exemple unique de ce qu'aurait pu être – s'il n'y avait pas eu l'invention du langage, la formation des mots, l'analyse des idées – la communication des âmes.

A la Recherche du temps perdu III, 762-3 (my emphasis)

This remark manifests the Narrator's growing suspicion of the chances for human language to succeed in interpersonal communication, he having encountered, as the readers of the *Recherche* know, countless failures of 'la parole humaine extérieure' by this point in the novel. However, we must note that the communication referred to here and contrasted with music is indeed 'la parole humaine *extérieure*' – language used in social communication. Acknowledging this allows us to remain hopeful regarding the potential of what might be described as 'la parole intérieure' in communicating meanings in as profound a way as music.[32]

Furthermore, considering the terms in which the Narrator expresses himself here, using the conditional (what music 'aurait pu être' 's'il n'y avait pas eu l'invention du langage'), we cannot deem the Narrator's comment as *altogether* sceptical as to language's communicative potential – particularly if we keep in mid the broader context of this experience within Proust's novel, which describes these other aesthetic experiences (of music as well as visual art) in such an effectual way precisely through words, metaphors, and, indeed, through analysing ideas. Language does, in a way, seem to 'colonise' non-linguistic experiences, but also allows us to appropriate and reflect on these experiences in a different and a possibly more all-encompassing way.[33]

Let us consider this difference further through an example from *Albertine disparue* in which language joins in with the experience of music. This happens when the Narrator hears a neighbour performing arias from Jules Massenet's *Manon* after Albertine's departure. Here the performer is not in the same physical space as the Narrator, which lessens the 'performed' dimension of the experience, making it more solitary and in this respect it also more like reading. Hearing the arias from afar, the Narrator seems to instantly focus on the *linguistic* dimension of the experience – that is, on the words and

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[32] In fact, in view of Proust's novel, it often seems that language, as it constructs such a major part of our subjectivity, can never be genuinely universal (and thus never free from misinterpretation regarding communication with others). This proposition will be further explored in the last two chapters of this study.

[33] It is also worth remembering that of course in Proust's novel we only ever get to witness the *mediation* of musical experience through words, never the experience itself – and yet, it seems that it is precisely mediation that ultimately makes the Narrator's experience *his* experience.

the narrative: 'J'appliquais leurs paroles que je connaissais à Albertine et à moi, et je fus rempli d'un sentiment si profond que je me mis à pleurer' (*RTP IV,* 35).

The words from the libretto, especially the lines 'Hélas, l'oiseau qui fuit ce qu'il croit l'esclavage/ le plus souvent, la nuit d'un vol désespéré revient battre au vitrage' (*RTP IV,* 35), are immediately *applied* by the Narrator to Albertine and himself and to his current despair caused by her parting; it is obvious that these words affect the Narrator very differently from the '[la] parole humaine extérieure' in social context which leaves the Narrator 'si indifférent' (*RTP III,* 762). The Narrator's application of the lyrics here is not based on merely listening to the words but, in fact, also on *remembering* them (he refers to 'leurs paroles *que je connaissais*'). Since he knows the lyrics already, this process of applying the words becomes a kind of reconstruction – a rereading – of the text, and thus also a kind of rereading of his own self (and his relationship to Albertine) in a new context. This example demonstrates the way in which literary language – poetic or narrative – may turn into communication with one's own self and thus become a kind of 'parole intérieure'.

The proposition that language is performative *in itself,* in the sense that its users are never merely recipients but always also interpreters and (re)creators, may shed some light on this process of appropriating linguistic expressions more wholly and immediately 'taking the ownership' of these expressions. The *Manon* passage illustrates this idea well, as the Narrator immediately applies the words and the narrative of the arias. Furthermore, it seems that the physical absence of the actual performer, the neighbour singing the arias, enhances the Narrator's ability so promptly to 'take the possession' of the piece and apply it to his own relationship with Albertine.

If we follow this line of thought, reading seems to become a kind of solitary equivalent of a performance. Kivy suggests this, describing reading as 'the experience of "seeing" and "hearing" in the imagination [as] a theatrical production in the mind'.[34] To explore this suggestion further, we may ask how does this experience differ from witnessing a text being performed on the stage, by actual actors. Proust's novel offers us an account of such experience as well, in the context of the Narrator witnessing a much anticipated

[34] Kivy, *The Performance of Reading*, p. 29

performance of La Berma as Phèdre. For the rest of this chapter, let us consider how this experience differs, primarily due to the presence of language, from that of a musical performance on the one hand and of a solitary reading experience on the other.

4.4. 'C'était de ces choses fameuses que mon imagination avait tant désirées': The Narrator and La Berma

In the passages depicting the Narrator's anticipation of La Berma's performance and subsequently witnessing of the performance itself, the multiple layers of interpretation in the experience are viewed in a far less positive light than in the context of music. The Narrator's familiarity with the play, Racine's *Phèdre,* leads the Narrator here to compare it with his previous experience of solitary reading – a process during which he has produced a rival interpretation of the play in his mind.

The clash between the Narrator's expectations and the 'reality' of the performance originates not only in his knowledge of the text but also in the way his imagination has embellished the adored Berma (whom he has only seen in photographs and posters):

> La Berma dans *Andromaque*, dans *Les Caprices de Marianne*, dans *Phèdre*, c'était de ces choses fameuses que mon imagination avait tant désirées. [...] [M]on cœur battait quand je pensais, comme à la réalisation d'un voyage, que je les verrais enfin baigner effectivement dans l'atmosphère et l'ensoleillement de la voix dorée. Un Carpaccio à Venise, la Berma dans *Phèdre*, chefs-d'œuvre d'art pictural ou dramatique que le prestige qui s'attachait à eux rendait en moi si vivants, c'est-à-dire si indivisibles, que si j'avais été voir des Carpaccio dans une salle du Louvre ou la Berma dans quelque pièce dont je n'aurais jamais entendu parler, je n'aurais plus éprouvé le même étonnement délicieux d'avoir enfin les yeux ouverts devant l'objet inconcevable et unique de tant de milliers de mes rêves.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 432-33

Interestingly, the theatrical performance is here discussed side by side with painting, and the knowledge of the piece that will be played is compared to a particular place and context to which a painting 'belongs'. La Berma, for the Narrator, 'belongs' to *Phèdre,* in the same way that a painting by Carpaccio belongs to Venice. What is ironic here, of

course, is that when the Narrator finally sees La Berma in *Phèdre,* she does not quite seem to 'belong': the reality does not live up to his own 'production' of Racine's *Phèdre,* created through reading, nor to the ideal Berma of his imagination.

The experience of La Berma's performance appears to fit to the Narrator's all-around pattern of expectation and disappointment that reoccurs throughout the novel with his experiences of love, society and places.[35] In somewhat striking contrast to the other aesthetic experiences described in the *Recherche*, it leaves him with a serious sense of lack. As Hughes remarks, the Narrator's attempt to evaluate La Berma's performance is a good example of how 'the self-doubt that is at the heart of his over-evaluation of established artists also comes to pervade his own artistic judgement.'[36] The disappointment that the Narrator feels is, indeed, somehow doubly horrifying because he, at the time, believes it must originate in his own lack of intelligence or aesthetic taste.

In the experiences of visual art and (instrumental) music in the *Recherche*, perception through the senses comes first and the recreation through language follows. The experience of a play on stage provides the spectator with an interpretation of both the sensuous (aural and visual) and the linguistic dimensions of the artwork, which makes the presence of the other rather dominant in the experience and, consequently, seems to make it somewhat impenetrable for the Narrator. During the actual performance, he tries very hard to discern La Berma's talent through his *senses,* considering 'cet instant, salle, public, acteurs, pièce, et mon propre corps [...] comme un milieu acoustique n'ayant d'importance que dans la mesure où il était favorable aux inflexions de cette voix' (*JF,* 440). However, this does not seem to produce the desired effects and he remarks how

> en même temps tout mon plaisir avait cessé; j'avais beau tendre vers la Berma mes yeux, mes oreilles, mon esprit, pour ne pas laisser échapper une miette des

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[35] For example in *La Prisonnière* (pp. 648-9 and 676-7) the Narrator makes similar remarks in discussing his dreams of Venice: '[C]es similitudes mêmes du désir et du voyage firent que je me promis de serrer un jour d'un peu plus près la nature de cette force invisible mais aussi puissante que les croyances, ou dans le monde physique la pression atmosphérique, qui portait si haut les cités, les femmes, tant que je ne les connaissais pas, et qui se dérobait plus triviale réalité.' (*RTP III,* 677) Also, the moment of finally seeing the Balbec church in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs II* lacks the anticipated tantalising effect on the senses; the Narrator, standing in front of the church, notes how 'l'église [...] faisait un avec tout le reste, semblait *un accident,* un produit de cette fin d'après-midi' (*RTP II,* 19, my emphasis).

[36] Hughes, p. 66.

> raisons qu'elle me donnerait de l'admirer, je ne parvenais pas à en recueillir une seule. [...] Je l'écoutais comme j'aurais lu *Phèdre*, ou comme si Phèdre, elle-même avait dit en ce moment les choses que j'entendais, sans que le talent de la Berma semblât leur avoir rien ajouté. J'aurais voulu – pour pouvoir l'approfondir, pour tâcher d'y découvrir ce qu'elle avait de beau – arrêter, immobiliser longtemps devant moi chaque intonation de l'artiste, chaque expression de sa physionomie [...].
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 441

The Narrator's eyes and ears are not able to 'immobilise' the words, as the play on the stage keeps progressing and, indeed, seems to flee from him, availing him only a taste of all the pleasures that the gestures and tones of the adored artist might (assumedly) convey to him, if only he had more *time* to savour them. Especially interesting here is the comment 'je l'écoutais comme j'aurais lu *Phèdre*,' which manifests clearly the Narrator's attempt, in his search for a true aesthetic gratification, to access the same kind of pleasure that the text has given to him in the solitary moments of reading. In these moments, he is able to stop, go back, digress and return to the text. Listening 'comme j'aurais lu *Phèdre'* is impossible, however, as the performance on the stage proceeds, leaving the Narrator with a feeling that he cannot 'keep up' with the experience: 'Mais que cette durée était brève! A peine un son était-il reçu dans mon oreille qu'il était remplacé par un autre.' (*RTP I,* 441)

La Berma the actress becomes in a way invisible and inaudible on stage, and while such acting – where the thespian becomes indistinguishable from the role she is playing – would normally be considered as *good* acting, it leaves the Narrator deeply unsatisfied. It is not thus due to some incapability of his senses or his intellect to 'take it all in' that causes the Narrator's disappointment, but rather his expectations of witnessing La Berma *act* – actually seeing and hearing the 'acting'. The other, possibly even more compelling reason is that he is familiar with the play, and the 'real' Phèdre therefore ('Phèdre elle-même') for the Narrator is the Phèdre that he has created through his imagination whilst reading and which La Berma's acting, no matter how brilliant, can never match. This example seems to further support Kivy's proposition that reading is a kind of performance in its own right – not merely an interpretation in *thought* but one in

which the imagination vividly engages our senses as well, resulting in a kind of complete 'production in the mind.'[37]

This kind of clash between different interpretations seems to be absent from the performance of (instrumental) music, as we saw above in the context of the Narrator's reflections on the Septet. Unlike within a performance of a text, music may allow us a perfect sense of harmony, with the music as well as the other members of the audience, because this kind of music is free in a way from intrinsic 'content' or meaning. What seems to connect the performances of drama and music in the *Recherche* however is that both these experiences, as performances, are to some extent restricted by temporal (as well as spatial) conditions. Music is described as 'un être surnaturel et pur qui *passe* en déroulant son message invisible' (*RTP I,* 342) and something which one can only love in 'temps successifs' and can never possess 'toute entière' (*RTP I,* 521), and with La Berma's performance everything that happens on the stage, including the words that are articulated, seems to pass too fast.

This temporal element seems to be one aspect in which the experience that is effectuated by the other (that is, by a performer) falls short of the solitary reading experience: in a performance, there is no time to reflect, to drift away and then come back with the same kind of freedom as with a text. If we compare these examples of *Manon* and La Berma to reading, it is indirectly suggested that reading stimulates the powers of imagination more fully and completely somehow than any other experience and, because of this maximised role of imagination, becomes an experience which is truly and properly *ours*.

This idea of a more thorough appropriation of an experience through language takes us back to the remarks on the ontology of a literary work of art that were made at the end of the previous chapter in the context of paintings – how a literary work really only exists through the reading process, which leaves less room for the presence of the other in the experience. The Narrator states that 'la trouvaille du romancier a été d'avoir l'idée de remplacer ces parties impénétrables à l'âme par une quantité égale de parties immatérielles, c'est-à-dire que notre âme peut s'assimiler' (*RTP I,* 84). These

[37] Kivy, *The Performance of Reading*, p. 29.

immaterial elements in a text require the reader to recreate the text and allow the reader to fill them with his or her personal associations, thus also in a way, taking the ownership of what is being expressed with words. (It is this kind of appropriation that we also saw above in the Narrator's experience of the lines from *Manon.)* As the Narrator puts it, 'les émotions de ces êtres d'un nouveau genre [dans le texte] nous apparaissent comme vraies, puisque nous les avons faites nôtres, puisque c'est en nous qu'elles se produisent' (*RTP I,* 84).

While the process of reading seems to be slower in some ways and perhaps less immediately pleasing to our senses than the experience of visual art or music, the experience of reading does, for these very reasons, seem to hold a specific potential to reveal to us something about the way we *become* ourselves. Reading 'en soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) and the kind of gradual layering of meaning is a process which parallels to the way the multiple layers of time, experience and reality become embodied in us. In the last part of this study, I focus on the suggestion that the reading process may provide the readers with a more profound understanding of the nature of 'la réalité' and enable, in a unique way, communication with one's own self.

PART III

‘LES PROPRES LECTEURS D’EUX-MEMES’

All night I sat reading a book,
Sat reading as if in a book
Of sombre pages.

It was autumn and falling stars
Covered the shrivelled forms
Crouched in the moonlight. [...]

The sombre pages bore no print
Except the trace of burning stars
In the frosty heaven.

– Wallace Stevens, ‘The Reader’ [1]

[1] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 125.

5. ‘Lire d'une certaine façon pour bien lire’: Literary Communication and Different Modes of Reading

At the beginning of this study I raised the question of what is ‘other’ to literature. I have considered the relationship between philosophy and literature in Part One and the experience of other art forms in Part Two. In this final part, I discuss literature’s communicative possibilities by examining different modes of reading in the *Recherche* and the heightened role of impressions in enabling one to ‘bien lire en soi-même’ (*RTP IV,* 610). In Chapter Six I revisit the relation between immediate and mediated experience and discuss in more detail literature’s potential to enhance our self-understanding, through the Narrator’s seemingly paradoxical proposition that the readers can become ‘les propres lecteurs d’eux-mêmes’ through someone else’s text.

The concept of ‘literary communication’, first of all, brings us back to the question that was posed in Chapter Two of what is meant by ‘literary’. I suggested that instead of defining a literary experience simply on the basis of what types of texts are being read, it seems more worthwhile to approach literary experiences and their possible implications in life by considering the *modes* of reading instead. Indeed, as we will see shortly, ‘literariness’ in view of Proust’s novel seems to have more to do with the nature of the reader’s experience than with specific textual genres, or the style, form,‘operational’ or historical context of the texts. We may in fact ask whether genre, instead of being something which fundamentally shapes the way we read, is a mere precursory construction which is bound to be dismantled and recreated within the reading experience.

The different reading modes in Proust’s novel seem to fall into two main categories: ‘instrumental’ reading and aesthetic reading. By instrumental mode I refer to the kind of reading which serves a purpose and is carried out in search of something other than

mere aesthetic pleasure. I approach this mode by analysing three examples from Proust's novel, each of which represents a different subcategory of instrumental reading (some of which still have aesthetic elements as well). First, I consider an ethical mode of reading through the reading of Mme de Sévigné by the Narrator's grandmother and mother. The second type is a kind of intermediary mode between ethical, social and aesthetic, in which literary references function as a code and offer a mutual plane for communication without pre-established ties; an example of this kind of use of literature appears in somewhat surprising conversation between the Narrator and Jupien in *Le Temps retrouvé.* Thirdly, I consider the type of instrumental reading that involves the use of art and literature as 'social currency'.

The aesthetic mode of reading, in contrast to these instrumental modes, can be regarded as a more or less disinterested, recreational activity, which has no particular objectives and which does not search for any particular justification outside itself. In this mode, the readers are not asked to consider (judge or praise) the text as a work of art outside themselves but simply 'dire si c'est bien cela, si les mots qu'ils lisent en eux-mêmes sont bien ceux que [l'écrivain a] écrits' (*RTP IV,* 610). It is through this kind of approach that texts seem to be able to become '[l]es verres grossissants', furnishing the reader with 'le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610). Such a mode of reading can of course also be regarded as motivated in the sense that it can, as Proust's novel implies, help us to understand ourselves better. Yet it cannot be considered as strictly 'instrumental', as these desired effects are not attainable *deliberately* but rather through impressions the text yields to us and which may disclose to us unmarked aspects of our experiences in-the-world.

Before moving on to the examples of different modes of reading in Proust, it is worth briefly considering the concept of 'literary communication' in comparison to 'everyday communication' (such as conversation and letters). One of the most obvious and most crucial characteristics of literary communication is that it starts in solitude, in the act of reading. In her book *The Syllables of Time,* Teresa Whitington discusses Proust's take on John Ruskin's ideas of reading as conversation and suggests that while Proust does not reject Ruskin's idea of reading as exchange of ideas, he finds the term 'conversation' unacceptable, since 'reading is a phenomenon which cannot be conveyed

in terms of orality'[1]. Instead, in 'Journeés de lecture', Proust proposes that reading is an act of communication which takes place in solitude:

> [C]e qui diffère essentiellement entre un livre et un ami, ce n'est pas leur plus ou moins grande sagesse, mais la manière dont on communique avec eux, la lecture, au rebours de la conversation, consistant pour chacun de nous à recevoir communication d'une autre pensée, mais tout en restant seul, c'est-à dire en continuant à jouir de la puissance intellectuelle qu'on a dans la solitude et que la conversation dissipe immédiatement, en continuant à pouvoir être inspiré, à rester en plein travail fécond de l'esprit sur lui-même.[2]

The suggestion that we can communicate with 'une autre pensée' better 'tout en restant seul' seems peculiar at first. This proposition, however, arises from the idea that the communication with 'une autre pensée' in reading is freer from the restrictions of time and place and the social codes of practice which characterise conversation. These restrictions, Proust believes, affect our 'puissance intellectuelle', which does not only to *suffer* from the physical presence of the other but occasionally seems, in fact, to get discharged altogether.[3] Noteworthy here is that the Narrator does not claim reading to be communication with the other *per se,* but, in fact, with 'une autre pensée'.

The distinction that gets underlined in the *Recherche* is not just that between oral and written communication, however, but between communication in everyday life and communication through art. In everyday contexts, various kinds of texts, especially letters, get misread, often due to the reader's lack of knowledge of the other, or even indeed, of their own self. For example, Swann does not see Odette's first letter as a calculated attempt at seduction because he is already in love with her, and the Narrator is incapable of reading Charlus's presents (one of which comes with a card with forget-

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[1] Whitington, p. 5. Whitington's attention to reading as a psychological phenomenon and its function as a source of communication for the Narrator is engaging; however, this communicative potential of reading is in her book primarily regarded as a window to communication with other people, as something which facilitates one's understanding of the social and spatial-temporal surroundings in which the reading takes place.

[2] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 174.

[3] Michael R. Finn has explored the connections between Proust's neuraesthenia – 'that *fin de-siecle* chronic fatigue syndrome'– and the writer's work. Finn suggests that Proust's suspicion towards orality and the invasiveness of speech is greatly due to the way that 'the physical presence of others seems to have had a particularly jangling effect on the Proustian psyche' and that 'a kind of nervous absenteeism [...] came over [Proust] when he was in presence of someone he admired.' Michael R. Finn, *Proust, the Body and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 66.

me-nots pictured on it – a coded messages in itself that the Narrator fails to grasp) as a sign of seduction until after his discovery of the Baron's homosexuality. Similarly, the Narrator fails to recognise the true origin of the telegram through which Albertine is 'raised from the dead' because he finds it so hard to believe she is really gone.

Some critics, such as Paul de Man and Philip Bailey, have emphasised the limits of *all* communication in Proust, including the communication through art, and I will engage with such criticism, particularly Bailey's criticism of the communicative potential of literature, at the end of this chapter. It is true that according to Proust's Narrator, it is possible to read in a 'wrong' way and to 'misread' in art as well, and it is not clear whether art's rewards remain momentary, fragile and fugitive.[4] However, as we saw in the context of paintings, music and performance in Part Two of this study, aesthetic experiences in Proust still allow one to approach the other in a somewhat more genuine and fruitful way than everyday communication does (even though aesthetic communication does not, of course, still count as a relationship *per se* with that other). In this chapter I analyse some reading-related passages in the *Recherche* and propose that while the aesthetic experience is not portrayed as an incontrovertibly 'redeeming' activity in Proust, it nevertheless plays a crucial role in the Proustian process of self-understanding – the process which seems to become available to us only by entering into communication with 'une autre pensée, mais tout en restant seul'.[5]

Considering this suggested 'redemptive' potential of a literary work, the question of why and how we read becomes essential. For the Narrator, the reading of literature is primarily an aesthetic, solitary, 'self-revelatory' process, which is recreational in two senses of the word.[6] As it is not something he does in search of a particular aim or result, the act of reading seems to avail to him 'essences', the kinds of truths which, were one to attempt to explain logically, descriptively and exhaustively, would remain unintelligible. The Narrator's experience demonstrates how truths that can be disclosed in the reading process are not truths of 'intelligence' or logic planted there consciously

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[4] I shall discuss some examples of 'faulty' modes of reading in section 5.3. below.

[5] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 174.

[6] In Chapter Six, I explore the question of what this kind of mode of reading eventually brings the Narrator *in life*, examining the relation between the 'aesthetic' reading of literature and 'being oneself'.

by an authorial figure or voice. Rather, as the Narrator concludes in *Le Temps retrouvé,* the ultimate work of art, 'notre seul livre' (*RTP IV,* 458) is something which already exists within us and through which we read. Before examining the Narrator's theory in more detail, I analyse different practices and outcomes of 'instrumental' reading – the reading of literary texts with a motivation or an aim beyond aesthetic pleasure – through examples of the Narrator's mother and grandmother, Jupien, and a young valet in the Narrator's apartment in Paris.

5.1. 'Pas [la] Sévigné de tout le monde': Mme de Sévigné as a *Vade Mecum* for the Narrator's Grandmother and Mother

The committed way in which the Narrator's grandmother and mother read the Mme de Sévigné correspondence, interweaving the text into their interpersonal real-life communication, plays a significant role in what is one of the few successful relationships presented in Proust's novel. The function of Mme de Sévigné's letters is one dimension of 'literary communication' in Proust which has not yet been exhaustively studied; Roland Barthes mentions the function of Mme de Sévigné references in the *Recherche,* and Elisabeth Ladenson examines the idea of 'mother-worship' in view of these references in her article 'The law of the mother: Proust and Madame de Sévigné'.[7] More remains to be said, however, about the Sévigné letters as a prime example of a text which affords different readings within the narrative and illustrates the versatility of the literary experience.

The way these letters are read outside their original context (a correspondence between two historical personae) also shows how non-fictional texts can be read aesthetically and 'used' creatively.[8] Mme de Sévigné (1626–1696) was a French aristocrat and lady

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[7] See Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 107; Elisabeth Ladenson, 'The law of the mother: Proust and Madame de Sévigné', *The Romanic Review,* Vol. 85 (1994), pp. 91-112 .

[8] In any discussion concerning the 'authenticity' of these texts, one should keep in mind that the collection of the letters the grandmother and the mother so devotedly study is in fact an outcome of a careful selection and editing process by Mme de Sévigné's granddaughter. Also, parts of Mme de Sévigné's correspondence were published already during her lifetime, so in her later years she was aware of this semi-public nature of the letters which must have had an impact on her writing; therefore, the attempt to track down the 'true' Sévigné from these letters would be rather precarious in the first place. See e.g. Michèle Longino Farrell, *Performing Motherhood: the Sévigné correspondence* (Hanover; London: University Press of New England, c1991), pp. 146-50.

of letters, whose correspondence with her daughter and friends was edited and published by her granddaughter in the eighteenth century. These letters are renowned for their textual and stylistic merits, as well as their socio-historic value, as they give a vivid account of the life of the French aristocracy in the seventeenth century, while also portraying the close relationship between Mme de Sévigné and her daughter.

In Proust, the Sévigné letters are devotedly read and quoted by the Narrator's grandmother and mother both in their speech and in letters they write.[9] Their fascination with these letters stems from their communicative *finesse* and their portrayal of an ideal mother-daughter relationship. Their devotion to the Sévigné correspondence is so comprehensive, in fact, that at times it seems almost as if they are 'acting out' the relationship of their literary models in their own relationship. Ladenson, discussing the way the Narrator's mother and grandmother use Mme de Sévigné, proposes that the function of these letters in Proust as a kind of model for mother-worship in the *Recherche*: 'Sévigné is read and quoted by the grandmother and mother with every appearance of scriptural fidelity and evangelical zeal; her letters to her daughter form a peculiarly maternal Bible in the novel, maternal by virtue of both content and context.'[10] For the two women, the Sévigné text thus functions as a kind of *vade mecum* – a source of ethical values and a model for good communication – and in this sense their reading is always motivated.

This ethically driven mode is at work also with other texts they read, and on several occasions, the mother and the grandmother try to inculcate in the Narrator their own mode of reading. One example of such (at least attempted) communication – or, rather, inculcation – through literature takes place at the end of the 'drame du coucher,' when the Narrator's mother eventually stays the night in his room and reads to him George Sand's *François le Champi,* which the Narrator has received as a gift from the grandmother. The mother, reading to her young son, moulds the text into more 'suitable' form: 'quand c'était maman qui me lisait à haute voix [...] elle passait toutes

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[9] For example when the Narrator is about to embark on his first journey to Balbec with his grandmother and is saying goodbye to his mother at the station, the mother tries to alleviate his anxiety by alluding to Sévigné, not only by quoting her directly, but through the grandmother: 'Citons Madame de Sévigné, *comme ta grand-mère*: "Je vais être obligée de me servir de tout le courage que tu n'as pas."' (*RTP II,* 11, my emphasis).

[10] Ladenson, p. 96.

les scènes d'amour' (*RTP I,* 41). She reads beautifully and expressively, and yet her act of reading is guided by her own reading mode, prone to and aimed at ethical elucidation rather than *mere* aesthetic pleasure.

However, already in these instances, what literature seems to evoke in the Narrator is primarily his imagination and his aesthetic consciousness rather than his moral conscience – the tendency which is only to be reinforced once he starts reading more (and especially when he starts reading prose fiction) on his own. The Narrator notices whenever the mother skips passages in the book but still enjoys the experience and finds it, above all, aesthetically pleasing: 'Si ma mère était une lectrice infidèle c'était aussi, pour les ouvrages où elle trouvait l'accent d'un sentiment vrai, une lectrice admirable par le respect et la simplicité de l'interprétation, par la beauté et la douceur du son' (*RTP I,* 41). While reading here is a kind of performance, the Narrator's closeness to the 'performer' – the private nature and the emotional intensity of the situation – makes this experience very different from both reading by oneself and the Narrator's experience of other more public 'performances' (in the theatre and in *soirées)* later on in the novel.

One of the grandmother's attempts to 'develop' her grandson's character through literature takes place in the beginning of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs II*, when they travel to Balbec for the first time. Before the departure of the train, in order to calm his nerves and alleviate the anxiety caused by change of circumstances and saying goodbye to his beloved mother, the Narrator has, according to his doctor's orders, gulped down a beer. The grandmother is not too pleased about this, and when her slightly inebriated grandson gets very verbose, she suggests he should try to sleep for a while. When he protests, she says 'Si tu ne peux pas dormir, lis quelque chose' (*RTP II,* 13) and hands him the *Lettres de Mme de Sévigné.*

The grandmother's 'read *something'* here of course means 'read Mme de Sévigné' and serves as an example of the grandmother's subtle attempts to shape her grandson's character through the kind of literature that resonates with her own ethical attitudes and awareness. In the passage that follows, we see how the Narrator welcomes the text but not the mode: his reading of Mme de Sévigné differs remarkably from that of the

grandmother and the mother: '[D]éjà cet après-midi là, dans ce wagon, en relisant la lettre où apparaît le clair de lune […], je fus ravi par ce que j'eusse appelé un peu plus tard (ne peint-elle pas les paysages de la même façon que lui les caractères?) le côté Dostoïevski des *Lettres de Madame de Sévigné*' *(RTP II,* 14). The Narrator's focus is clearly on the aesthetic dimension of the text, on the sensuous and visual aspects that the text evokes.[11]

Here we see how the Narrator's aesthetic fascination with literature, in which impression and sensation gradually override philosophical and intellectual contents, produces a relationship to these texts which is very different from the more ethical mode of the mother and the grandmother. Thus, the Sévigné letters in Proust function as a kind of peculiar intermediary between 'purely' artistic texts and those which are (originally) aimed at interpersonal communication. It is through these different modes of reading that the multiple after-lives of the Sévigné text become possible, when the text, through its readers, gains distance from its original context. From this aspect, the mother's 'material' attachment to the dead grandmother's copy of Sévigné is intriguing and takes us back to the discussion about the ontology of a textual work.

The difference between a literary work as an object and the way it is perceived has been explored for example by Barthes in his essay 'De l'œuvre au texte', who views 'Le Texte' as 'un champ méthodologique,' while 'l'œuvre [est] un fragment de substance [qui] occupe une portion de l'espace des livres (par exemple dans une bibliothèque)'.[12] Such a distinction seems to be partly challenged by the way the mother and grandmother 'employ' the Sévigné letters, however, in the sense that while the Sévigné texts become 'un champ méthodologique' for the mother and the grandmother, it still retains some meaning as a material object as well. After the grandmother's death, these two dimensions of the work seem to become rather inseparable for the Narrator's mother who regards her mother's copy of the Sévigné letters not only as a sacred memento but almost as a kind of emblem of their loving relationship.

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[11] I discuss this comment on the Dostoyevskian side of Mme de Sévigné in detail below in 5.4.

[12] Roland Barthes, 'De l'œuvre au texte' in *Œuvres complètes*, Tome II, 1966-1973 (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p. 1212.

The mother's attachment to the particular copy of the text does not of course originate in the object *per se* but rather follows a kind of logic of a holy relic: the book becomes so valuable because it has belonged to the beloved mother and because of the way the text has been interwoven into their relationship. For the devoted daughter, this copy becomes *the* authentic book which she 'n'eût pas changé contre le manuscrit même des *Lettres' (RTP III,* 166). It is equivocal whether the book is in fact discussed primarily as 'un champ méthodologique' or as an object here. However, this example seems to imply that the separation between 'le Texte' and 'l'œuvre' is not by any means a straightforward one: the portrayal of the reading experience in Proust in general, and in the context of the Sévigné text in particular, shows how a merging of the text into the life of the reader does not merely happen in the domain which our mind operates, but how the appropriation of a text is always also attached to the sensuous, bodily, material and 'tangible' world as well.

In its multiple manifestations, this Sévigné dimension of the grandmother and the mother's relationship implies that in Proust there definitely *is* 'hors-texte' – that texts can and do exist 'outside themselves' in the sense of being interwoven into the life of their readers in various ways. In view of the grandmother and mother's 'adaptations' of Sévigné, it seems that what they extract from their experience of reading is much more than the semantic contents of the text or a model for communication; the two women do not simply copy their literary models – Mme de Sévigné and her daughter – but, in fact, seem to be using their appropriation of the text as a form of self-creation. Approaching the uses of the Sévigné text in Proust from a strictly textually-oriented viewpoint would allow neither the interpersonal aspects nor these self-revelatory ones to be fully explored, nor would such an approach be able to explain why the Sévigné text is read in such a different way by these two women and the Narrator. The Sévigné dimension is one of the features in Proust's novel which calls for a hermeneutic and phenomenological practice – an approach which refuses the strict distinction between the textual universe and that of the reader-subject.

The way the text takes prominence in the relationship between the two women is not, however, presented in an indubitably positive light – even if theirs is one of the few relationships in the novel which seems genuinely 'successful' and harmonious. The

following passage, in which the Narrator observes his mother's behaviour after the grandmother's death, exemplifies the more sinister effects of the Sévigné legacy:

> Non seulement ma mère ne pouvait se séparer du sac de ma grand-mère, devenu plus précieux que s'il eût été de saphirs et de diamants, de son manchon, de tous ces vêtements qui accentuaient encore la ressemblance d'aspect entre elles deux, mais même des volumes de Mme de Sévigné que ma grand-mère avait toujours avec elle, exemplaires que ma mère n'eût pas changés contre le manuscrit même des *Lettres.*
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 166-7

The Narrator's mother starts imitating her dead mother after her passing, reading her books on the beach and even wearing her clothes, as well as constantly quoting both the grandmother and Mme de Sévigné in her letters and speech. As Elisabeth Ladenson points out, 'the hero's mother in the *Recherche* deals with the grandmother's death by *assuming her identity,* and it is no accident that that identity is centrally articulated through citations of Sévigné's letters to her daughter.'[13] Even though the mother's behaviour originates in her ceaseless appreciation, love and respect for her mother and in the deep pain of having lost her, it does not seem exactly healthy or rewarding.

One of her ways of paying homage to her mother is to quote Mme de Sévigné in the way she would have done, while despising the 'Sévigné de tout le monde' (*RTP III,* 236) – the more widely spread and clichéd quotations from the *Lettres*. This example underscores the element of personalised reading, which makes the usage of the text a kind of exclusive code between the two women. This aspect of the grandmother's Sévigné legacy is further illustrated in the way the mother's quotations produce feelings of exclusion in the Narrator. When he reads his mother's letters, they, while addressed to him, markedly follow the pattern of communication established between the two women: he remarks how 'dans chacune des trois lettres que je reçus de maman avant son arrivée à Balbec, elle me cita Mme de Sévigné, comme si ces trois lettres eussent été non pas adressées par elle à moi, mais par ma grand-mère adressées à elle' (*RTP III,* 167).

[13] Ladenson, p. 96 (my emphasis).

It must also be noted, however, that the Narrator himself refuses the mode that the two women employ (and subtly try to inculcate in him), and it is partly because of his refusal or incapacity to read in this way that the sphere of experience shared by the two women remains inaccessible to him. This does not mean, however, that he would fail to take pleasure in the Sévigné letters altogether; he simply approaches them differently, through a more aesthetically focalised way of reading, which I shall discuss shortly – possibly partly as a reaction to the feelings of exclusion from his mother and grandmother's code.

While the case of the mother and the grandmother represents an interweaving of literary texts into a close personal relationship, Proust's novel also shows examples of different kinds of literary code-sharing, where the references to a mutually known text unexpectedly offer a platform for communication in a far less established relationship. One of these instances is a conversation that takes place in *Le Temps retrouvé* between the Narrator and Jupien. Whereas the grandmother and mother's code embodies a strong ethical element and the sharing of mutual values, in the following example, it seems almost as if in the conversation between the Narrator and Jupien the literary code *frees* the discussion of any moral dimension, which might obstruct the communication if the matter at hand – Jupien's sadomasochistic brothel – was addressed in a more straightforward way.

5.2. Code-sharing: 'C'est mon Sésame à moi'

After witnessing the self-inflicted abuse of Charlus in Jupien's brothel, the Narrator feels inclined to make Jupien aware of what he has seen. This short passage describing the Narrator's relationship to Jupien offers a peculiar example of the communicative potential of literary references: while the references to literature here do not necessarily function as a means of communication *per se*, they do provide a profitable *platform* for communication, facilitating a discussion of a somewhat difficult topic. The Narrator first implies what he has witnessed by referring to *Les Mille et Une nuits:*

> 'En attendant, dis-je à Jupien, cette maison est tout autre chose, plus qu'une maison de fous, puisque la folie des aliénés qui y habitent est mise en scène,

> reconstituée, visible. C'est un vrai pandemonium. J'avais cru, comme le calife des *Mille et une Nuits,* arriver à point au secours d'un homme qu'on frappait, et c'est un autre conte des *Mille et une Nuits* que j'ai vu réaliser devant moi, celui où une femme, transformée en chienne, se fait frapper volontairement pour retrouver sa forme première.'
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 411

The Narrator's euphemisms immediately reveal to Jupien that the Narrator must have seen the Baron being beaten: 'Jupien paraissait fort troublé par mes paroles, car il comprenait que j'avais vu frapper le baron.' (*RTP IV,* 411) Despite seeming troubled by this revelation at first, Jupien swiftly picks up the code and continues the conversation, now himself referring to *Les Mille et Une nuits*, as well as to the title of Ruskin's *Sésame et les lys* which he has undoubtedly come across at Charlus's house:

> 'Vous parlez de bien des contes des *Mille et Une Nuits*, me dit-il. Mais j'en connais un qui n'est pas sans rapport avec le titre d'un livre que je crois avoir aperçu chez le baron (il faisait allusion à une traduction de *Sésame et les lys,* de Ruskin, que j'avais envoyée à M. de Charlus). Si jamais vous étiez curieux, un soir, de voir, je ne dis pas quarante, mais une dizaine de voleurs, vous n'avez qu'à venir ici; pour savoir si je suis là vous n'avez qu'à regarder là-haut, je laisse ma petite fenêtre ouverte et éclairée, cela veut dire que je suis venu, qu'on peut entrer; c'est mon Sésame à moi. Je dis seulement Sésame. Car pour les Lys, si c'est eux que vous voulez, je vous conseille d'aller les chercher ailleurs.'
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 411-2

At first, Jupien's references seem like a slightly comical extension of the Narrator's euphemism, and while his response manifests blazing ability to swiftly and cunningly adapt to the Narrator's code, it seems unlikely that he has actually *read* Ruskin or even necessarily *Les Mille et Une nuits*. The role of reading literary texts must not be overemphasised here, since the references in the actual code Jupien uses are in fact quite generic, and with Ruskin's *Sésame et les lys,* it is only really the title of the book which feeds into Jupien's 'code'.[14]

However, what follows is the Narrator's somewhat surprising commentary on Jupien's character, in which he deems Jupien one of the most intelligent and sensitive men he

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[14] However, we have to keep in mind this conversation is mediated through the Narrator, and these remarks by the Narrator might also be just another example of his patronising behaviour, *assuming* that Jupien could not have read the actual text.

knows, and suggests this intelligence does not originate in education or social class but simply Jupien's 'natural' sensitivity to what is beautiful in language:

> C'était son simple *sens inné, son goût naturel,* qui de rares lectures faites au hasard, sans guide, à des moments perdus, lui avaient fait composer ce parler si juste où toutes les symétries du langage se laissaient découvrir et montraient leur beauté.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 416-17 (my emphasis)

The Narrator believes that it is due to these qualities that Jupien has managed to extract a lot from the texts he has come across and read 'au hasard [et] sans guide' during his life. The emphasis that the Narrator here places on the form of Jupien's speech is another indication of how Jupien's use of literary references above cannot be taken simply as a humorous ciphering or euphemism used to embellish his dubious business attempts. Jupien's literary codes are not merely based on the contents of what he has read, but the reading of literature, according to the Narrator, has affected Jupien's entire way of speaking, in which 'toutes les symétries du langage se laissaient découvrir et montraient leur beauté' and, in this particular case, equipped him with appropriate metaphors.

The code which the Narrator and Jupien share is not exactly an established one, as the literary texts referred to are not in any way diffused into their interpersonal relationship. Rather, these references provide an unbiased and (possibly morally) freer space for exchanging messages – a space where a certain dialogue between fiction and reality can take place. This passage may also be read as further evidence of how a fictional text can hold truths precisely because of the unique position in which it situates its reader – or rather, *refuses* to situate him or her. Although in a much less determined way than in the relationship between the mother and the grandmother, this exchange between Jupien and the Narrator seems to point to literature's communicative value in life.

From the viewpoint of different reading modes, then, the Narrator's remarks about Jupien's 'sens *inné'* suggests that Jupien's receptiveness is not (only) a result of reading literature but in fact something much more innate. This passage implies that there is such a thing as a 'goût naturel' which is independent from the reader's educational and

social background and that the mere reading of literature does not magically transform us into something we were not before, but rather that the reading process can enhance some aspects of our character that might otherwise remain hidden or dormant. In this respect, reading seems to become a kind of intersection of the inner qualities of a person and the way he or she is in the world, which prompts us to ask whether it is this 'sens inné' that actually determines one's reading mode.[15]

The emphasis that the Narrator here places on 'sens inné' and 'goût naturel' in the reading process also indirectly suggests that the lack of such qualities may result in what might be regarded as less valuable or less profound ways of reading. This is another topic in relation to which we must keep in mind the inner inconsistencies of Proust's novel and draw a distinction between the writer-Narrator in *Le Temps retrouvé* and the younger Narrator-protagonist who is keen to observe and describe what he considers as 'misuse' of art, such as the public display of one's aesthetic preferences as a purported manifestation of one's aesthetic sophistication, taste and sensitivity, done (at least in part) in order to obtain some social recognition. Next, I examine some such manifestations in the novel, before moving on to examine the Narrator's own mode of reading and the writer-Narrator's suggested 'moyen de bien lire' at the end of the *Recherche.*

5.3. 'Les célibataires de l'art' and 'les lecteurs naïfs'

Examples of over-enthusiastic but 'unfertilised' approaches to art surface in many of the societal scenes in the *Recherche*. The Narrator, discussing these numerous showy lovers of art, remarks how they 'n'extraient rien de leur impression [et] vieillissent inutiles et

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[15] It must be noted here that 'innate' in Proust is never a simple term: most often it refers to something concealed, something which surfaces only occasionally and often surprisingly in the ways in which people look, speak or behave. A good example is the 'innate nobility' and gracefulness of Saint-Loup. Saint-Loup's nobility only truly manifests itself to the Narrator in the instances such as Robert's dance across tables under the electric wires in a restaurant – an act which he performs just in order to fetch his sickly friend's overcoat because the room is chilly – or the way he throws his own overcoat on the Narrator's shoulders when they are out driving in Balbec. As the Narrator puts it: 'A retrouver toujours en lui [Saint-Loup] cet être antérieur, séculaire, cet aristocrate que Robert aspirait justement à ne pas être, j'éprouvais une vive joie, mais d'intelligence, non d'amitié. Dans l'agilité morale et physique qui donnait tant de grâce à son amabilité, dans l'aisance avec laquelle il offrait sa voiture à ma grand-mère et l'y faisait monter, dans son adresse à sauter du siège quand il avait peur que j'eusse froid, pour jeter son propre manteau sur mes épaules...' (*RTP II,* 96).

insatisfaits, comme des célibataires de l'art' (*RTP IV,* 470). The failure of these enthusiasts, according to the Narrator, is their inability to seize the aesthetic impression and unveil some of its mystery by connecting it to their own life experiences. It is due to this failure that they remain 'barren', never truly consummating their relationship with art.

Another failure of these 'célibataires' is their proneness to use their alleged knowledge of artworks as social currency. Mme Verdurin is a prime example of a character who throughout the novel parades her aesthetic preferences and 'sensitivity' in social situations. While Mme Verdurin does seem to possess some kind of true sense for talent (recognising, for example, Rachel's innovative way of performing and supporting her artistic career at the end of the novel), the reader of Proust's novel cannot be sure, any more than the Narrator can, whether her theatrical displays of emotions during concerts for example are genuine or not.[16] The way she uses her 'sensitivity' and her self-advocated aesthetic superiority as a means to promote her societal position and look down on others – such as the poor Saniette who trembles 'comme une recrue devant un sergent tourmenteur' (*RTP III,* 324) when questioned by the Verdurins about his experiences of plays – does, however, imply a somewhat gross misuse of art.

It is not just in the world of the Guermantes or the Verdurins, however, that people use art as an 'embellishment' of their social character. In *Le Côté de Guermantes II,* the Narrator discusses the reading habits of the young valet in his apartment in Paris, who is keen on borrowing books from their library. The young valet attempts to impress his peers in the countryside and distinguish himself as an urban sophisticate by inserting quotes from famous poems into his letters to his friends back home. For his letters, the valet chooses '[les] chose[s] connue[s] de tout le monde' from the poems and, as the Narrator somewhat cruelly remarks, 'bien qu'écrivant à ces paysans dont il escomptait

[16] In *La Prisonnière*, for example, the Narrator observes how it is impossible to tell whether she is crying or asleep as she hides her head in her hands. When Mme Verdurin states 'Je n'ai rien contre Vinteuil; à mon sens, c'est le plus grand musicien du siècle, seulement je ne peux pas écouter ces machines-là sans cesser de pleurer un instant,' the Narrator notes how 'elle ne disait nullement "pleurer" d'un air pathétique, elle aurait dit d'un air aussi naturel "dormir"; certaines méchantes langues prétendaient même que ce dernier verbe eût été plus vrai, personne ne pouvant, du reste, décider, car elle écoutait cette musique-là la tête dans ses mains, et certains bruits ronfleurs pouvaient, après tout, être des sanglots.' (*RTP III,* 745-6).

la stupéfaction, il entremêlait ses propres réflexions de vers de Lamartine, comme il eût dit: qui vivra verra, ou même: bonjour.' (*RTP II,* 617-18)

The question that arises here is how the young valet comes to pick these particular passages. If he chose them simply because those are the things he has heard repeated in societal situations, his use of the texts would seem primarily to function as social embellishment, originating from the desire to seem aesthetically and intellectually more 'cultivated' than his peers in the countryside. However, the fact that the valet actually takes the books from the library and *reads* them instead of just using 'second hand' knowledge (repeating things as he has heard them), does imply some genuine literary appetite. According to this interpretation, it seems that he lands on these popular quotations indeed due to some kind of inner sensitivity, similar to the 'sens inné [et] goût naturel' that Jupien is said to possess (*RTP IV,* 416).

The case of the young valet is just one of the many occasions in the novel where the Narrator casts his judgement on the way others experience art. The relatively uneducated valet could be considered a prime example of an 'innocent' reader, and the Narrator's condemnation of the valet choosing the most 'obvious' bits (the generally most quoted extracts) from the poems, for example, seems therefore somewhat harsh. Even if the valet clearly uses quotations as social currency, it is possible, and even likely, that there is also a genuine love of reading which motivates his enthusiasm, in which case the Narrator's comments are not just snobbish and degrading but also unjust in a way.

Furthermore, we must keep in mind that the Narrator, as we can witness by following his aesthetic apprenticeship throughout the novel, is very much 'a work in progress' himself. As a boy, he exercises exactly the kind of escapism in art of which he later accuses others; as Roger Shattuck notes, 'when Marcel's Sunday afternoon reading in Combray tempted him to turn away form his existence in dissatisfaction and desire, he was misusing art as an escape and not discerning himself through its lens'.[17] For a long time, his aesthetic activities are also overshadowed by the urge to (try to) over-intellectualise his experiences. As for the Narrator's use of art in social interaction, the

[17] Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Way*, p. 159.

way he judges the young valet seems particularly unfair because the Narrator himself uses art to enhance his position in the eyes of the others – not as publicly as the valet, Mme Verdurin or Oriane, but within a more private sphere, especially in his relationship with Albertine.

There is, thus, a notable difference between the younger Narrator-protagonist and the writer-Narrator who in *Le Temps retrouvé* rather emphatically promotes the interpretative freedom of the reader. The younger Narrator is much more judgemental (for instance in his comments about the valet's reading habits) and more patronising (especially regarding Albertine as a reader) than the man who in *Le Temps retrouvé* states that 'la reconnaissance en soi-même, par le lecteur, de ce que dit le livre, est la preuve de la vérité de celui-ci et vice-versa' (*RTP IV,* 490). He also remarks how

> d'autres particularités (comme l'inversion) peuvent faire que le lecteur ait besoin de lire d'une certaine façon pour bien lire; l'auteur n'a pas à s'en offenser mais au contraire à laisser la plus grande liberté au lecteur en lui disant: 'Regardez vous-même si vous voyez mieux avec ce verre-ci, avec celui-là, avec cet autre'.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 490

While this passage advocates a maximal freedom of interpretation, it nevertheless also contains the conception of '*bien* lire'. Thus, a certain sense of hierarchy is still at work here, and the Narrator further remarks how 'le livre peut être trop savant, trop obscur pour le lecteur naïf et ne lui présenter ainsi qu'un verre trouble avec lequel il ne pourra pas lire' (*RTP IV,* 490). The way to 'bien lire' does not seem to relate so much to the reader's ability to appreciate specific aesthetic or intellectual formal properties of the text itself; rather, the ultimate test of a successful reading experience seems to be whether or not it releases and brings to light something personal and variable within the reader.

This theory of reading that the Narrator eventually voices at the end of the *Recherche* is sketched out by Proust already in 'Journées de lecture'. In this essay, Proust discusses falsely motivated reading experiences and emphasises the importance of reading as 'l'incitatrice dont les clefs magiques nous ouvrent au fond de nous-même la porte des

demeures où nous n'aurions pas su pénétrer'.[18] While the idea of reading as a form of escape is presented as a very tempting option ('Quel bonheur, quel repos pour un esprit fatigué de chercher la vérité en lui-même de se dire qu'elle est située hors de lui, aux feuillets d'un in-folio'), Proust notes that, for someone who reads like this, 'le livre n'est pas l'ange qui s'envole aussitôt qu'il a ouvert les portes du jardin céleste, mais une idole immobile, qu'il adore pour elle-même, qui, au lieu de recevoir une dignité vraie des pensées qu'elle éveille, communique une dignité factice à tout ce qui l'entoure.'[19]

This idea that a book can be regarded as a key to discovering truths rather than as a source in which they would exist objectively, independent of the reading process, is yet another point in Proust's novel which resonates with hermeneutic theories. For example Hans-George Gadamer's treatment of truth as something which can only be revealed to us through an ongoing 'play' (*Spiel*) between unconcealment and concealment, true and false resonates with the Narrator's comments. In line with Proust's ideas, instead of considering a work of art as 'une idole immobile', adored 'pour elle-même'[20] and embodying truths for our consciousness to grasp, Gadamer remarks that the basic sense of truths that are available through an aesthetic experience is that of 'unconcealment' rather than 'correctness'. These truths always necessitate 'opening up' by the one who experiences, disclosure through a creative interpretative process.

While our experience of the work of art is always attached to the form of the artwork and the perspective it represents, philosophical hermeneutics emphasises that the disclosure of truths in art cannot happen merely through analysis of the formal and aesthetic properties of the work. According to Gadamer, 'the consciousness of art, the aesthetic consciousness' is a contradiction in terms, in the sense that 'when we judge a work of art on the basis of its aesthetic quality [i.e. its formal properties] something that is really much more intimately familiar to us is alienated.'[21] What is 'much more intimately familiar' in the aesthetic experience, then, arises from our lived experience and the (sometimes unmarked) associations and parallels we draw between the

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[18] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve,* pp. 180-1.

[19] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve,* p. 181-183.

[20] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve,* p. 183.

[21] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 5.

imagined and the real.[22] Gadamer proposes that this ongoing 'play' between the unfamiliar and the familiar, between the impressions that the form of the artwork evokes in us and our similar experiences outside those forms, is fundamental to the ontological structure of the work of art, giving form and order to the aesthetic experience, as well as ensuring that an aesthetic experience does not become a disengaged exercise of the recipient's subjectivity.

An aesthetic experience *can* enhance our self-understanding, but only when we approach the artwork through something that is 'intimately familiar to us'.[23] The 'essences' or 'truths' artworks can reveal to us are not simply there for us to take, but rather we arrive at them through a process which is not merely intellectual but also unconscious and sensuous. It is this personalised process in which the 'recognition' of an essence or a truth can happen, as we 'play' with the idea. One of the flaws of the 'célibataires de l'art' seems to be that they seek 'aesthetic consciousness' by concentrating primarily on the artwork's formal properties, failing to truly examine their own impressions, sensations and emotions that the artwork evokes. This kind of experience remains on the surface of the artwork and cannot therefore enable true communication with 'une autre pensée' or with one's own self.[24]

What makes an artwork a valid medium of self-understanding, as Paul Crowther puts it, is precisely the way that art 'reflects our mode of embodied inherence in the world, and by clarifying this inherence it brings about a harmony between subject and object of the experience – a full realisation of the self. In the creation and reception of art, we are able to enjoy a free-belonging to the world'.[25] So, to fully appreciate the idea of self-revelatory potential in reading literature, we need to emphasise the *freedom* that reading in this kind of highly subjective way allows us –how the sensuous and 'non-cogent'

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[22] In the context of paintings in Chapter Two we saw how already the initial experience of a painting may give us a sense of the 'familiar' due to a mere visual resemblance. In a literary or musical experience, these associations can often go unmarked during the first time we experience an artwork but become available in time, through repetition. In the next chapter, I discuss a passage in *Le Temps retrouvé* which describes the attachment of memories to the books one has read; this passage in Proust demonstrates germanely the kind of dimension of the process of reading which reaches beyond conscious formal analysis and through which lived experience gets intertwined in the experience of a text.

[23] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 5.

[24] Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 174.

[25] Crowther, pp. 5-7.

dimension of 'reading for pleasure' liberates the reader, if only momentarily, from the search for objective knowledge or function outside itself. In the last section of this chapter, I discuss the Narrator's reading mode in more detail – this kind of reading without a particular pre-fixed aim.

5.4. The Narrator's Sévigné, the Narrator's Dostoyevsky: Literary Impressions and Aesthetic Reading

The Narrator seems to engage with the books he reads in a very different way than the mother and the grandmother; his mode of reading is an aesthetic mode, in the sense that it does not search for justification outside being an aesthetic experience. Whereas the mother and the grandmother use the Sévigné text to improve and enrich their relationship and their interpersonal communication, the Narrator's reading experiences seem to induce primarily subjective, solitary and internal responses, and have less direct impact (or none at all) on the ways he interacts with other people.[26] For the young Narrator, the Sévigné texts for example do not offer ethical or communicative models but very specific (and highly subjective, as we shall see shortly) literary impressions.

The Narrator's first contact with literary fiction happens through a selection of novels he receives as a birthday present; the purpose of this present, carefully selected by his family members, is to pass on some 'virtues of tact and savoir-vivre' to the Narrator.[27] One of the books is George Sand's *François le Champi* which receives much attention throughout the *Recherche.* It is a text that is both read *to* him by his mother and read *by* him, and Proust's descriptions of these experiences point both to the difference between the experience of a text through listening and reading and to the difference between the Narrator's reading mode and that of his mother. When his mother reads to him, the Narrator becomes absolutely captivated by the story, whereas reading by himself seems

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[26] This may partly be because the 'workings' of literature happen slowly and it is only in his mature years that these effects begin to be revealed to him, but as the Narrator points out in *Le Temps retrouvé,* the revelations in art succeed the experience, not the other way around: 'L'impression est pour l'écrivain ce qu'est l'expérimentation pour le savant, avec cette différence que chez le savant le travail de l'intelligence précède et chez l'écrivain vient après.' (*RTP IV,* 459).

[27] Bucknall, p. 129.

a much more *self*-reflective experience: he tends to get distracted and notes how 'quand je lisais, je rêvassais souvent, pendant des pages entières, à tout autre chose' (*RTP I,* 41).

This is an interesting phenomenon with which every reader undoubtedly is familiar: we read and suddenly realise that we have stopped paying attention to the text some sentences or even pages earlier. This kind of loss of concentration is a much overlooked aspect of the reading experience, and when it does receive attention, it is usually considered as a failure in the reading process. However, those moments when the reader's attention moves from the text to something else 'outside' the narrative are a crucial part of the aesthetic reading experience and particularly noteworthy in the sense that they show how *involved* both our senses and our mind can still be with the surrounding 'actual' world when we read. In the *Recherche,* the loss of concentration when reading, and especially when reading fiction, seems not to be merely passive 'drifting away' from the subject of the book but rather a sign of the way in which the reader's mind is activated by the text. In the process of reading literature, which is free from a particular aim or purpose, reading becomes an act that, as Watt puts it, 'revitalises our perceptual capacities, injects energy into our often flagging powers of observation, our sense of participation in the world'.[28]

Watt discusses this dimension of the reading experience, by analysing the eminent role that sensory stimuli, such as colours and sounds, play in the young Narrator's reading experiences in Combray, as well as in the light of his later comment in *Le Temps retrouvé* that 'une heure n'est pas qu'une heure; c'est un vase rempli de parfums, de sons, de projets et de climats' (*RTP IV,* 467-68).[29] The sensuous dimension both animates the text and offers the reader a chance to negotiate between the experience in the real and in the imagined world of the book. As Watt beautifully puts it: 'An hour spent reading, according to the vase metaphor, is never *just* that: it is an amalgam of all that is evoked, and set in motion during the interaction between the reader and the text.'[30]

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[28] Watt, p. 174.

[29] See Watt, pp. 31-8 and pp. 138-42.

[30] Watt, p.138 (emphasis in the original).

Another aspect in which this 'aesthetic' mode seems to improve on the other, more instrumentalised modes of reading is that it allows us a disinterested relationship with the text, which no other person can take away from the reader. The benefit of communication with one's own self as opposed to using literary texts in enhancement of one's relationships to others is that the relationship to a text cannot be destroyed or swept away by the discrepancies and disappointments in life (such as death, deception or break-ups). We already saw such alteration in the Narrator's mother's relationship to the Sévigné letters after the grandmother's death: she seems to lose the dynamic and communicative aspect of the text, which then gets reduced to a kind of shrine or holy relic, a way of commemorating the dead mother rather than communicating with the living (such as her own son who finds the Sévigné quotes in her letters alienating rather than communicative).

The way the two women read Sévigné, interweaving the text into their relationship, makes the interpretation and experience of the text more vulnerable in the sense that it is easily shattered (at least partly) by the death of the other person. The Narrator, on the other hand, does not experience this kind of dissociation in *his* relationship to the text after his grandmother's death, as he reads Sévigné differently to begin with; neither does he experience a loss of identity with the death of the grandmother (or later with the death of Albertine), although he does note how the death of the beloved results in *part* of himself dying along with them.

The Narrator seems to read Mme de Sévigné as one would a fictional text, without paying much attention to the socio-historic background of the letters or to the people who wrote them. But reading literature is not mere escapism for him either, even if he refuses to connect the texts to life in the same kind of social, moral and 'practical' manner as the mother and the grandmother. Indeed, to propose that the Narrator approaches texts aesthetically is not to say he simply appreciates the form over the content. His love of literature is not aestheticism, merely appreciating the formal properties of the text, but rather savouring and reflecting on the powerful impressions these forms produce within him. Even though these impressions are not sought for any particular purpose, they become, as we shall see shortly, a means for the Narrator to embrace life experiences and also his experiences of other texts he reads, thus

improving on the enthusiastic but unfruitful attitude of 'les célibataires de l'art'. A prime example of such a literary impression, which seems to be both the cornerstone and the outcome of reading 'aesthetically', is the Narrator's repeated comment about 'le côté Dostoïevski de Mme de Sévigné' *(RTP II,* 14; *RTP III,* 880).

This remark is a good example of the way in which reading in this way is, however, still an intrinsically *isolating* experience. This isolating effect is revealed in a conversation between the Narrator and Albertine where this literary impression is discussed: when Albertine asks the Narrator what he means by 'le côté Dostoïevski de Mme de Sévigné' – this pairing of two seemingly so unconnected writers – the Narrator seems incapable of providing her with a straightforward answer. This inability implies that such impressions can never really fully be shared. These literary impressions are doubly subjective in the sense that the points of comparison between texts are not (unlike with representational painting for example) 'out there' to be objectively pointed at or directly perceived by our senses but rather created through (i) the reader's imagination and (ii) the unique context of the actual scene of reading and what has been sensed during the act of reading.

As we saw above, 'le côté Dostoïevski de Mme de Sévigné' is first mentioned when the voice of the adult Narrator, looking back on his first train journey to Balbec with his grandmother, links these two seemingly different kinds of text together:

> [J]'ouvris le volume que ma grand-mère m'avait tendu et je pus fixer mon attention sur les pages que je choisis çà et là. Tout en lisant je sentais grandir mon admiration pour Mme de Sévigné. […] [D]éjà cet après-midi là, dans ce wagon, en relisant la lettre où apparaît le clair de lune […], je fus ravi par ce que j'eusse appelé un peu plus tard (ne peint-elle pas les paysages de la même façon que lui les caractères?) le côté Dostoïevski des *Lettres de Madame de Sévigné.*
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 13-14

The use of visual imagery is prominent in this passage, as well as in the Narrator's later elaborations on the Sévigné-Dostoyevsky connection: Mme de Sévigné 'paints' the landscapes in her text in the similar manner that Dostoyevsky 'paints' his characters. The Narrator's choice of the verb 'paint' here seems to reinforce the overall significance of the senses in the reading experience and also points back to the rather complicated

relationship between the visual perceived through the eyes and the visual created by imagination, discussed earlier in Chapter Three.[31]

What is also noteworthy here is the mood that the Narrator employs. The narrating voice belongs to the older Narrator who looks back on the experience in the Balbec train and who has later acquainted himself with Dostoyevsky, thus using the pluperfect subjunctive in examining the aspects in Sévigné he 'would have later called' ('ce que *j'eusse appelé* un peu plus tard') 'le côté Dostoïevski des *Lettres de Madame de Sévigné*' (*RTP II,* 14). But more importantly, the mood can be read as an implication of a certain level of incertitude, pointing here to the way in which a literary impression may be quite impossible to define – even for the subject of the experience himself.

The visual also becomes predominant later when the Narrator attempts to explain the connection between Dostoyevsky and Sévigné's 'peinture' to Albertine, and it is right to ask whether such a comparison can, in fact, be regarded as further evidence of how the visual in Proust is often used as a means to put one's finger on the 'unspeakable' other. The Narrator resorts back to a comparison between literary and visual artworks, placing Dostoyevsky side by side with Elstir's impressionist paintings:

> [J]'avoue que ce que j'avais dit là était assez bête. Mais je l'avais dit pour deux raisons. La première est une raison particulière. Il est arrivé que Mme de Sévigné, comme Elstir, comme Dostoïevski, au lieu de présenter les choses dans l'ordre logique, c'est-à-dire en commençant par la cause, nous montre d'abord l'effet, l'illusion qui nous frappe. C'est ainsi que Dostoïevski présente ses personnages. Leurs actions nous apparaissent aussi trompeuses que ces effets d'Elstir où la mer a l'air d'être dans le ciel. Nous sommes tout étonnés après d'apprendre que cet homme sournois est au fond excellent, ou le contraire.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 880

The Narrator's remark on how, in Dostoyevsky's texts, the words on a page first strike us with an impression, instead of following a logical sequence of cause and effect, can be read as a statement as much about our perception of the text as about the method of the writer. Also, the way he relies on comparisons with paintings and compares the methods of a writer to those of painters, suggests that his aesthetic experience of

[31] See pp. 107-8 for discussion.

Dostoyevsky entails a deeply sensuous dimension, which is not something distinct from the textual experience but in fact inseparably intermingled with it. Whether the Narrator even sincerely tries to explain this connection (or simply fails to) is unclear. It is almost as if he anticipates the failure to completely explain his meaning by saying: '[J]'avoue que ce que j'avais dit là était assez bête.' (*RTP III,* 880)

It is interesting in its own right that the moment the Narrator starts talking about '[la] création d'une certaine âme' that he finds in the texts of a particular writer and comparing it with other texts, we seem to feel the need to explain this connection and to pinpoint the meaning and method behind this connection. If we, in contrast, consider for example the Narrator's remark about how, on returning to Balbec for the second time, Elstir's Impressionist paintings of Balbec beaches have taught him to look at the sea differently, we do not seem to require further elaboration on this statement. The Narrator's comment that his 'yeux instruits par Elstir [...] contemplaient longuement ce que la première année ils ne savaient pas voir' (*RTP III,* 179) seems perfectly plausible and natural to us, whereas with the 'Dostoyevskian impression' we, like Albertine, seem to call for more detailed explanation for what exactly these 'Dostoyevskian' elements in Mme de Sévigné might be.

This intrinsic urge to 'open up' the Narrator's term 'Dostoyevskian' points to the doubly subjective quality of the literary impressions I mentioned earlier, as the referentiality between two texts is always dependent on the reader's interpretation. The Narrator's usage of an adjective which is created out of a proper name to label these impressions is interesting as well: it seems almost as if the experience of the text written by Dostoyevsky has been diffused with the Narrator's life experiences in such a personal way that it is impossible for him to take these two experiences apart and define or explain the former objectively. Just like other proper names in Proust, the names of painters or writers are reservoirs for highly personal webs of associations – as Roland Barthes puts it in his essay 'Proust et les noms', 'le Nom Propre est en quelque sorte la forme linguistique de la réminiscence' which offers in itself 'une catalyse d'une richesse infinie'.[32] The idea that certain impressions become attached to an experience of a text in a similar way that highly 'personal' associations get clustered around proper names

[32] Barthes, 'Proust et les noms', pp. 124-8.

may partly shed light on the Narrator's problem of explicating the 'Dostoyevskian side' of Mme de Sévigné to Albertine.

The exact connection between Dostoyevsky and Mme de Sévigné remains unexplored, however, and the Narrator does not, in fact, ever get around to explaining his 'other reason' either. When Albertine reminds him by saying 'oui, mais un exemple pour Mme de Sévigné' (*RTP III,* 881), the Narrator simply resorts to another comparison with paintings (and comparison between Dostoyevsky and paintings, *not* Sévigné):

> [J]e peux au moins croire que Baudelaire n'est pas sincère. Tandis que Dostoïevski... Tout cela me semble aussi loin de moi que possible, à moins que j'aie en moi des parties que j'ignore, car on ne se réalise que successivement. Chez Dostoïevski je trouve des puits excessivement profonds, mais sur quelques points isolés de l'âme humaine. Mais c'est un grand créateur. D'abord, le monde qu'il peint a vraiment l'air d'avoir été créé par lui. Tous ces bouffons qui reviennent sans cesse, tous ces Lebedev, Karamazov, Ivolguine, Segrev, cet incroyable cortège, c'est une humanité plus fantastique que celle qui peuple *La Ronde de Nuit* de Rembrandt. Et peut-être n'est-elle fantastique que de la même manière, par l'éclairage et le costume, et est-elle, au fond, courante. En tous cas elle est à la fois pleine de vérités, profonde et unique, n'appartenant qu'à Dostoïevski.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 881-2

According to the Narrator, the world Dostoyevsky 'paints' really seems to be created by him and is full of 'vérités, profonde et unique, n'appartenant qu'à Dostoïevski', but these truths nevertheless address 'quelques points isolés de l'âme humaine' (*RTP III,* 881). This observation adds almost a kind of pseudo-Platonic ring to the Narrator's words, as if the truths that the Dostoyevskian text touches upon were, like Platonic Ideas, somehow universal and unique at the same time. And yet, as universal as the Narrator might consider these truths, Proust's text here manifests how 'Dostoyevskian' clearly means different things to the Narrator and, for example, Albertine. The Narrator's comments on how these 'Dostoyevsky-specific' truths travel straight to the mysterious 'points isolés' in the soul, as if bypassing the contingent phenomena, also seems to suggest that such truths are not accessible through deliberate, cogent interpretation of the properties of the artwork alone.

Rather, these 'life-like' impressions are always stylised, personal, and different for each reader.

This idea of highly individualised reading experiences leads us to ask, then, why does the Narrator deem *this* in many ways isolating and subjective approach as 'le moyen de bien lire' (*RTP IV,* 610)? To conclude with, let us consider the aesthetic reading mode through a set of objections to the communicative possibilities of literature in Proust presented by Bailey in his study *Proust's Self-Reader*; examining Bailey's arguments, which stand in such a strict opposition to the views expressed in this study, in more detail will allow me to elaborate on the hermeneutic interpretation of the nature and value of the Proustian reading experience as I see it.

To begin with, Bailey accuses Proust's Narrator of rejecting direct verbal communication 'because he turns to a solipsistic *subjectivism* to rationalise and accommodate his emotional inability to empathise and sympathise with others' by 'setting up a communicative hierarchy of art over life, of writing and reading over conversation.'[33] Moreover, Bailey suggests that the Narrator's hierarchy of art over life is incoherent, 'because it is absurd to pretend we can empathise while writing and reading, but not while listening and speaking.' [34] While it is true that the Narrator does not seem to be too empathetic in his own relationships, Bailey seems to ignore two important aspects of the Narrator's proposal regarding literature's communicative power.

Firstly, Bailey makes no distinction between the younger Narrator, who himself uses art as an escape route from boredom and later on occasion employs his aesthetic punditry as social currency, and the writer-Narrator who at the end of the novel finally presents his revelation about how a work of art needs not to be invented but pre-exists us (*RTP IV,* 459*)*. The statements about reading as communication with the self only come after the great revelations of time and memory in *Le Temps retrouvé*; it is therefore inconsistent to take the Narrator as a prime example of the way of reading literature he postulates at the end of the book and through which he, perhaps, wishes to prevent

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[33] Bailey, p. 147 (emphasis in the original).

[34] Bailey, p. 147.

others from making the same mistake of reading, in some sense, life through art and not the other way around.[35]

Secondly, Bailey sets out to compare different forms of communication through language (both spoken and written) primarily as communication with *others.* As far as literature is concerned, it is not, however (not at least merely, or even primarily) communication with others that Proust's Narrator accentuates at the end of the *Recherche,* but rather the reader's communication with his or her own self. Although Bailey does acknowledge the Narrator's idea of a book as a magnifying glass that enables its readers to 'lire en eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610), he dismisses it simply as a remark made in order to 'tolerat[e] the misunderstandings of imperfect communication,' suggesting that the Narrator 'even predicts and accommodates this inevitable miscommunication in offering the reader several different lenses through which to read'.[36] Bailey's perspective, thus, is based on an assumption that there is such a thing as a 'correct' reading of a text and that communication through literature should transmit particular meanings between the writer and the reader or between different readers in order to be considered successful (or 'privileged'). With this kind of starting point, Bailey's argument overlooks one of the most vital aspects of reading in Proust's novel: the contrast between communication with others and communication with one's own self, as well as the importance of how one's everyday life experiences become merged with the reading process.

In *Le Temps retrouvé,* the Narrator acknowledges the process of self-understanding as one of the most pivotal aspects of literary experience and explicitly renounces his authority over his impending book – not because he thinks it cannot reveal essences or communicate meanings, but because he recognises that these cannot be accessed as objective elements in the text but rather need to be discovered by the reader through reflecting the text 'en soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610). An artwork can house something universal (something which addresses 'quelques points isolés de l'âme humaine' (*RTP III,* 881)) but these universal essences are only ever attainable through subjective

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[35] It is also worth pointing out also that for the Narrator, fiction eventually supervenes any rationalisation of these emotions Bailey seems to condemn him for.

[36] Bailey, p. 148.

experience – through an experience that activates a range of personal memories, sensations and emotions, through which the reader can recognise 'en [soi]-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) what they read.

It is through this kind of hermeneutic and phenomenological approach, which relies on the reconciliation between the inner and the outer world of the reader through imagination while still acknowledging that the way one uses one's imagination is always tied to the material, sensuous emotional reality (of which the reader always remains part while reading), that the grounds for art's communicative potential in Proust can be revealed and defended. While reading does not necessarily offer experiences that are 'deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life', as Martha Nussbaum points out, they can enable the reader to experience life in a deeper and sharper way.[37] Nussbaum continues:

> [Proust's] novel's procedures do not bring everything about the soul into a perspicuous ordering; but this is part and parcel of its view that not everything about the human soul *is* perspicuous, that the deepest depths are dark and shifting and elusive. A form of representation that would imply otherwise would be artificial and untruthful.[38]

The novel, as it were, takes its readers on a journey the destination of which is not clearly defined. While Bailey's suspicion concerning the 'redemptive' uses of literature as far as interpersonal communication and relationships are concerned may be valid (for indeed, within the narrative, the reading of literature hardly releases the reader from the uncertainty and disappointments of dealing with other people), the supremacy of art in the *Recherche* seems to arise from the way it may help us to acknowledge the temporal, changeable and obscure nature of life and 'reality', and, in so doing, help us to *experience* life and to savour it – even when things go wrong.

This brings us back to the problem of aesthetic consciousness discussed earlier. In the Narrator's attempts to explain the Dostoyevskian side of Sévigné to Albertine by analysing the aesthetic quality and the formal properties of these works, it seems that

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[37] Nussbaum, p. 48.

[38] Nussbaum, p. 258 (emphasis in the original).

indeed something which is 'really much more intimately familiar' to him gets alienated.[39] The experience of the text written by Dostoyevsky has become so entangled with the Narrator's subjective sphere of experience that it becomes impossible for him to define or explain it objectively. This reminds us of how closely our imagination, through which we 'paint the scenes' of a book, relies on our previous experience, which is the 'much more intimately familiar' within us that the artwork addresses.[40] As Crowther notes, 'there are no raw facts *vis-a-vis* perception, memory, and imagination. Rather these are given a distinctive character by virtue of the unique personal history of the subject who experiences or projects them. In a word, experience is [always] *stylised.'*[41]

This kind of 'stylisation' is the germ of the self-revelatory potential of the aesthetic reading mode, and it also works the other way around: 'Dostoyevskian' for the Narrator becomes a means of encompassing his experiences in the same way that Elstir's paintings 'train' his eyes. As Shattuck eloquently puts it, while 'literature cannot ever be a substitute for experience', it is 'not therefore excluded from any role of *shaping* our experience.'[42] In the last chapter I explore this connectedness between reading and being (or becoming) oneself and return to the paradox discussed in Part One of the thesis of how one can become 'le propre lecteur de soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) through someone else's words.

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[39] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 5 (my emphasis).

[40] This connectedness between the aesthetic and life experience is even more clearly manifested in the context of *François le Champi* and a book by Bergotte which the Narrator finds in the Guermantes library in *Le Temps retrouvé,* which I shall analyse in the next chapter.

[41] Crowther, p. 172 (emphasis in the original).

[42] Shattuck, *Proust's Way*, p. 226 (my emphasis).

6. *'Le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes':* Reading and Being

In *Le Temps retrouvé,* finally setting out to write his book, the Narrator describes his goals as follows:

> [J]e pensais plus modestement à mon livre, et ce serait même inexact que de dire en pensant à ceux qui le liraient, à mes lecteurs. Car ils ne seraient pas, selon moi, mes lecteurs, mais les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes, mon livre n'étant qu'une sorte de ces verres grossissants comme ceux que tendait à un acheteur l'opticien de Combray; mon livre, grâce auquel je leur fournirais le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes. De sorte que je ne leur demanderais pas de me louer ou de me dénigrer, mais seulement de me dire si c'est bien cela, si les mots qu'ils lisent en eux-mêmes sont bien ceux que j'ai écrits (les divergences possibles à cet égard ne devant pas, du reste, provenir toujours de ce que je me serais trompé, mais quelquefois de ce que les yeux du lecteur ne seraient pas de ceux à qui mon livre conviendrait pour bien lire en soi-même).
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 610

This passage is closely linked, especially through the beautiful imagery of '[l]es verres grossissants',[1] to the writer-reader relationship, which I discussed previously in Chapter Two. In the following, however, I ask shall ask what happens *after* the 'optical instrument' has been handed to the reader and focus on the process of becoming 'le propre lecteur de soi-même'.

In order to investigate the Narrator's statement – which seems inherently paradoxical in the sense that it suggests we only arrive at the self by going outside the self, through the other – we must begin by returning to the question of what the Proustian 'soi-même' in fact consists of. Is the Proustian notion of 'self' based on some (Platonic) essences, or does Proust's novel, and especially the motif of reading 'en soi-même', imply a far different notion of subjectivity – one which is not based on the idea of the self as a fixed essence but one much more subject to temporal contingency, the chance juxtapositions

[1] The beautiful optical imagery of 'verres grossissants' has been exhaustively analysed, for example by Roger Shattuck in his *Proust's Binoculars* (*passim).*

of experience and mediation through aesthetic experience? Or, even more radically, is the aesthetic experience something in which the subject-object distinction, the distinction between the self and the other, effectively disappears altogether? In this chapter I consider these different options, by returning to the discussion that was raised in Part One about the primacy of experience and its mediation, memory, imagination and the Proustian notion of 'la réalité'.

The Narrator's comments above prompt us to ask not only how the 'soi-même' should be understood but also what the word 'propre' here actually refers to. Instead of merely considering 'propre' as marking an emphasis (in the sense of 'the *very* readers of their own selves') or referring to ownership ('the readers of their *own* selves'[2]), it is also worth considering other possible interpretations of the word, to which I return in the course of this chapter. The immediate question that arises, however, is: does 'propre' suggest that there is a unified self that can be found, grasped and 'owned'? Or should we, on the contrary, consider the reading experience as moving towards a kind of trans-subjective state, a dispersion of 'eux-mêmes' across time and in the face of the 'otherness' of the text, and take this to be somehow the 'truest' or 'fundamental' state of being?[3]

There are passages in Proust, such as the opening scene of the novel, which seem to describe experiences on an almost pre-individual level – experiences of someone who is not yet experiencing them 'as himself'. These moments prompt us to ask whether such experiences, in fact, are experiences *of* the self at all; in other words, whether there is a level of existence where the self is not an appropriator of experience but in fact *is* the experience. Such an idea of selfhood as a series of singular experiences, without there being any one 'governing' subjective consciousness behind these 'singularities', has been explored for example by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Guattari's theory implies a radical notion of selfhood, in which the idea of a 'whole' sustainable self

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[2] The English translations of the *Recherche,* by C.K. Scott Moncrieff (*Time Regained*, 1930), its revised version by Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor (1981) and again revised by D.J. Enright (London: Chatto and Windus, New York: The Modern Library, 1992), as well as the most recent translation by Ian Patterson (*Finding Time Again,* London: Penguin, 2003), all translate 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' as 'the readers of their *own* selves'.

[3] It is also worth pointing out that, in Proust's text, the word 'propre' qualifies 'lecteurs' and not 'eux-mêmes' – so although certain licence is possible here, in any case it is not 'les lecteurs de leur propre *moi*'.

disappears, and proposes that our existence is based on 'singularités' – events or experiences that 'operate at a pre-personal, pre-individual level'.[4] 'Singularité', for Guattari, is the basis of existence, a genuine experience in which the 'imposed' object-subject distinction is not in operation. These 'singularités' are only linked together through 'pseudo-narratifs' – through repeated discursive practices and institutional and social conditions.[5]

As Guattari's theory is based on such an opposing view of the one that has been emphasised throughout this study – the self as fundamentally continuous, unified, substantial and at least potentially accessible to knowledge – I will not engage with it in detail here. However, such experiences as a 'pre-self' that Guattari emphasises are described in the *Recherche,* and their role must be acknowledged in order to make my interpretation of the Proustian notion of selfhood stronger. I therefore begin my discussion of reading 'en soi-même' by analysing the opening passage of the *Recherche,* in which the Narrator wakes up and 'recomposes' his self. I consider his initial experience of 'l'obscurité reposante' and his 'sentiment de l'existence [dans sa simplicité première]' (*RTP I,* 5) not as something which repels the idea of continuous selfhood but rather as an essential part of the process of becoming oneself. I then move on to consider the Narrator's suggestion of literary experiences as 'le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610), exploring the parallels between the process of becoming oneself and the process of reading.

One aspect of Guattari's theory that I wish to respond to in the following is his critique of the phenomenological approach as something which 'se trouve handicapée par un "réductionnisme" systématique qui la conduit à rétrécir ses objets à une pure transparence intentionnelle'.[6] As has already been demonstrated in the context of different aesthetic experiences in the previous chapters, the emphasis that Proust's novel places on the role of impressions, sensation and 'les épaisseurs d'art' within the aesthetic experience ensures that phenomenological reflection of these experiences in

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[4] Ian Pindar in the introduction to Felix Guattari's *Three Ecologies,* trans. by Ian Pindar (London; New Brunswick, N.J.: Athlone Press, 2000), p. 8.

[5] Félix Guattari, *Les Trois Ecologies* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1989), p. 26.

[6] Guattari, p. 26.

Proust does not reduce the artwork to 'une pure transparence intentionnelle'. For while I argue that there is a self which remains as a unifying core at the centre of these experiences, the genuine aesthetic experience in Proust – the kind of experience which may enhance one's self-understanding – is never a mere act of 're-confirmation' of the self. As Gadamer puts it, 'the real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable,' and in the true hermeneutic process, the subject and the object, the self and the other, are *not* considered as opposite poles charged with 'intention' but rather brought together in the interpretative space of in-between.[7]

There are two prominent aspects in the *Recherche* I explore in the following which seem to support the view of subjectivity with a unifying core at the centre of experiences – that the self is not merely a succession of singular experiences but also able to build and reflect upon these experiences. The first one is the idea of '[le] temps incorporé, des années passées non séparées de nous' (*RTP IV,* 623) and the 'layered' quality of selfhood this theory of time proposes. The second aspect arises from the Narrator's comment that 'la réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire' (*RTP I,* 182) and the emphasis on the creative interlinking of past and present and mediated and primary experience as the sole means to access reality (which, in turn, suggests there must be continuity behind these experiences, something which links them together).

The phenomenological approach to selfhood, while acknowledging that the self is subject to constant change in time and through its experiences in-the-world, considers the *continuity* of experience and the dialogue between the familiar and unfamiliar, the past and the present, the self and the other, as the fundamental basis for self-understanding of the human subject. This way of experiencing the self, as already suggested in Part One of this study, could be regarded as *processual.* In such a notion of selfhood, any 'disclosure' of the world and of our own selves can only come about through the process of interpretation which is based on (and indeed enabled by) what is *shared* between the new experience and past experiences. I now move on to discuss the overture of Proust's novel – the passage describing the process of the Narrator waking up and recomposing 'peu à peu les traits originaux de mon moi' (*RTP I,* 5-6), which addresses the very question of what it means to 'be oneself'.

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[7] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 13.

6.1. 'Je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j'étais': Being Oneself

The *Recherche* opens with the Narrator's description of the movement between sleeping and waking, between dreaming and reality. In this process, reflections on reading take over his mind and bring him to the edge of his 'knowable' self:

> [L]a pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière*; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François 1er et de Charles Quint.* Cette croyance survivait pendant quelques secondes à mon réveil; elle ne choquait pas ma raison mais pesait comme des écailles sur mes yeux et les empêchait de se rendre compte que le bougeoir n'était plus allumé. Puis elle commençait à me devenir inintelligible, comme *après la métempsycose les pensées d'une existence antérieure*; *le sujet du livre se détachait de moi, j'étais libre de m'y appliquer ou non;* aussitôt je recouvrais la vue et j'étais bien étonné de trouver autour de moi une obscurité, douce et reposante pour mes yeux, mais peut-être plus encore pour mon esprit, à qui elle apparaissait comme une chose sans cause, incompréhensible, comme une chose vraiment obscure.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 3 (my emphasis)

What is described here is a state of being only half awake, and half asleep, and therefore the reader cannot take everything the Narrator says at 'face value'. However, what this passage illustrates beautifully is exactly the kind of sense of non-subjectified existence one may experience in the very first instance of regaining consciousness and awaking from sleep.[8] While what is primarily described here seems to be the reassertions of the subject-object relationship which one obtains in waking life – negotiation between the reality and the imaginary – this passage is also connected to reading: the Narrator's comment about the book that he has been reading before falling asleep manifests the effects of reading on the Narrator's mind and draws attention to the way an experience of a text may linger in our unconscious in the same way that a 'lived' life experience can. The Narrator's 'recomposition' of '[s]on moi' (*RTP I,* 6) thus also becomes

[8] For example Edward Hughes discusses sleep as a *partial* escape from selfhood. See Hughes, pp. 50-56.

communication between his ‘known’ previous self and a new one that has been born in the reading process.

In the initial stages of waking up, the Narrator notes how he feels as if himself has momentarily become ‘ce dont parlait l’ouvrage’ (*RTP I,* 3) – what the book he had been reading before falling asleep was talking about. What is particularly noteworthy here is that ‘ce dont parlait l’ouvrage’ does not simply offer the Narrator an *alternative* to reality but is merged with reality (even though the Narrator here is partly in the state of dreaming). The role of language in shaping what we call reality is also illustrated poignantly in this passage, where the Narrator states that he sees himself not as a character in a book but an inanimate object (‘une église’), an artwork (‘un quatuor’) and even as something as abstract as a rivalry – a word, a concept rather than a feeling and thinking subject or even an immaterial object. Without the immediate bodily and sensuous experience (being half asleep in his bed) it almost seems as if he himself in this instance *becomes* language, being freed from the conceptualisation that we use language for in everyday life (and in a fully conscious state of mind). The Narrator notes how his self seems initially and temporarily to be ‘lost’ in the world of the book but a little later ‘le sujet du livre se détachait de moi, j’étais *libre* de m’y appliquer ou non.’ (*RTP I,* 3)

It is right to ask, however, how ‘free’ the Narrator in fact is: once he steps into this cognitive state of mind, he steps out of the de-subjectified existence in the dream world and becomes conditioned to establish his relation to the book and its subject matter as something external to him. Reading on, we see how the sensuous imprint that the past has left on the Narrator’s mind (and body) takes a central role: when his senses, memory and his intellect begin to awake, the Narrator is able to resort to individuality again. First, however, he enjoys being in this ‘obscurité, douce et reposante pour mes yeux, mais peut-être plus encore pour mon esprit, à qui elle apparaissait comme une chose sans cause, incompréhensible, comme une chose vraiment obscure.’ (*RTP I,* 3). This obscurity might be regarded as the kind of pre-individual experience that Guattari refers to.

The experience of obscurity is described predominantly as pleasurable, and the terms in which this pleasure is presented here are also interesting. The obscurity 'douce et reposante [...] pour mon esprit' in fact seems to imply a similar kind of liberation from the task of analysing and labelling (or even simply recognising) things that the Narrator occasionally experiences in the context of art – especially with Elstir's Impressionist painting and Vinteuil's music. It is *incomprehensibility* that is described as 'douce et reposante' here, rather than any kind of certainty or knowing. Indeed, the Narrator's comment of how liberating such incomprehension may be resonates with the certain accounts of his aesthetic experiences, which allow him '[un] retour sincère à la racine même de l'impression' (*G,* 712) – seeing the world without interpreting it. This prompts us to ask whether art can offer us a return to a similar kind of 'obscurité reposante' and if so, we must further ask: how can '[un] retour à l'inanalysé' (*RTP III,* 762) become a process of *understanding* oneself better?

The 'letting go of the self' in sleep means that the Narrator needs to rediscover, and indeed, recompose his self – 'put on' a self – every time he wakes up:

> Un homme qui dort, tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l'ordre des années et des mondes. […] Mais il suffisait que, dans mon lit même, mon sommeil fût profond et détendît entièrement mon esprit; alors celui-ci lâchait le plan du lieu où je m'étais endormi, et quand je m'éveillais au milieu de la nuit, comme j'ignorais où je me trouvais, *je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j'étais;* j'avais seulement dans sa simplicité première, *le sentiment de l'existence comme il peut frémir au fond d'un animal:* j'étais plus dénué que l'homme des cavernes; mais alors le souvenir—non encore du lieu où j'étais, mais de quelques-uns de ceux que j'avais habités et où j'aurais pu être—venait à moi comme un secours d'en haut pour me tirer du néant d'où je n'aurais pu sortir tout seul; je passais en une seconde par-dessus des siècles de civilisation, et l'image confusément entrevue de lampes à pétrole, puis de chemises à col rabattu, *recomposaient* peu à peu *les traits originaux de mon moi.*
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 5-6 (my emphasis)

This passage crystallises the competing views on selfhood in Proust. The Narrator's remark 'je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j'étais' – a sentence which marks the initial (temporal) absence of the knowable self – deserves particularly close attention. Before I move on to analyse it in detail, a note on what is meant in the following by 'knowable self': the distinction I am keen to make is that between simply

being conscious of being the subject of one's own experiences and having some kind of clear, conceptual 'knowledge' of oneself. For example for Heidegger, subjectivity is a defining feature in any 'true knowledge' we can possess of the world, which seems to imply, unlike many relativist theories that there *are* truths in the world to be not only 'known' but to be *experienced*. It is the former aspect on which I focus in the following, and to which, I argue, Proust's Narrator refers when he talks about 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' and 'le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610).

Giorgio Agamben, in his *History and Infancy: Essays on the Destruction of the Experience* analyses descriptions of regaining consciousness in a number of literary texts and suggests, on the basis of these descriptions, that there are 'experiences which do not belong to us, which we cannot call "ours", but which, for this very reason, precisely because they are experiences of the inexperiencible, constitute the extreme limit against which our experience can press, straining towards death.'[9] Agamben argues that the object of Proust's *Recherche,* for example, 'is not a lived experience, but quite the contrary something that has been neither lived nor experienced' – such as the very first moments described in the opening scene. As already noted, these 'inexperiencible' states occur in Proust's novel on several occasions, but acknowledging this does not need to mark the disappearance of subjectivity altogether.

Indeed, the very fact that we have these 'inexperiences' as a yet-to-be-defined self and that we are able to register and acknowledge them as such in retrospect (we are all familiar with how it feels to wake up, for example) or indeed talk *about* them at all, suggests that even these moments are experienced by a subject that *shares* something with the present, conscious, actively observing self. If we take the experience of dreaming and waking up for example, as Edward Hughes points out,

> one might say that sleep is always a pleasant non-activity for the Narrator [b]ut to imply from this that he relentlessly strives after a state of mindlessness would be overstating the point, clearly; the mood would seem to be a much more intermittent one. Besides, he realises that the escape from individual consciousness into sleep is never quite total. Vestiges of the self linger on – and,

[9] Giorgio Agamben, *History and Infancy: Essays on the Destruction of the Experience,* trans. by Liz Heron (London, New York: Verso, 1993), p. 39. Agamben discusses the moments of regaining one's consciousness through analysing the descriptions of such 'in-experiencible' states in Montaigne, Rousseau, Baudelaire and Proust.

> paradoxically, it is this very residue that enables the Narrator to savour the experience.[10]

Thus there seems to be, in the Narrator's sphere of experience, an undercurrent of continuity and unity which, rather than being something objective recognised and 'grasped', is in fact what enables us to 'grasp' our experiences in the first place and link them together in time and different physical, psychological and emotive states of being. The inexperiences – 'the experience with neither subject nor object' as Agamben describes them – can also be considered as an essential part of a hermeneutic process of understanding the self: a process which is not 'conceptual' but disclosive in nature and which 'requires that the unconscious elements involved in the original act of knowledge are brought to consciousness,' as Gadamer puts it.[11] Thus, the hermeneutic process of self-understanding is based neither on the search for 'obtainable' objective knowledge nor on imposing meanings intentionally, but rather on the dialogue with what is yet to be revealed.

To unravel this idea, let us look more closely at the Narrator's sentence 'je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j'étais' (*RTP I,* 5). The germ of this sentence is in the difference between the first 'je' and the second; while the first 'je' can be considered as a purely linguistic shifter, it nevertheless suggests that there is *something* there, preceding the second recognised self in the nominal clause 'qui j'étais' – something or someone not yet knowing what or who he is. This sentence opens up the movement from un-localised, unidentified subjectivity (or in Guattari's terms 'singularity') to the positioning of the nominal self, 'myself' ('qui j'étais'), which is suspended in the interim. Rather than reading this sentence as a proof of there being no subjectivity beyond 'an infinite drifting and casual colliding of objects and sensations,'[12] one could argue that it in fact illuminates the processing nature of selfhood in Proust: in a way, everything that happens in Proust's novel happens between these two 'je's – that is, the process of becoming oneself.[13]

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[10] Hughes, p. 56.

[11] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 45.

[12] Agamben, p. 42.

[13] I am grateful to Patrick ffrench for these insights and the discussions that helped me to pursue and develop this line of inquiry.

The Narrator's 'not yet knowing who he is' is followed by 'dans sa simplicité première, le sentiment de l'existence comme il peut frémir au fond d'un animal' (*RTP I,* 5). Here he moves on to some kind of recognition of a singular, embodied, phenomenological experience of existence. This is still, however, a kind of pre-subjectified moment, the sense of something which 'frémit' in animals and men alike; considering the etymology of the word 'animal', deriving from Latin *anima*, 'soul' is almost the word to use here, referring to a semi-individual state of existence which is not yet quite subjectivity.[14] From a Platonic viewpoint, this sentiment of existence could indeed be read as a sense of an 'essence', which is separable from 'ce dont parlait l'ouvrage' for example. However, this sentiment still does not yet count as a recognition of a *nominal* self but something far less fixed, something which merely 'frémit'.

This kind of primal, 'lingering' sense of self resonates in some ways with Plato's allegory of the cave: like the beings in the cave who are chained to the wall, the self here has a mere sentiment of existence, a mere shadow of reality, at his disposal.[15] It is only when the 'light' of memory and imagination is shed on this 'lingering' essence that the sense of self becomes 'fleshed out'. The same kind of enhancement seems to take place in Proust with some aesthetic experiences, such as Elstir's Impressionist paintings or the Vinteuil Septet, which *first* allow us liberating and restful obscurity, '[un] retour à l'inanalysé' (*RTP III,* 762), are then fleshed out with the help of memory and imagination which make the experience *ours,* allowing us to become aware not merely of 'what is' but of 'what might be'.

What is still primary here, however, prior to the arrival of memory and imagination, are the sensations of the body. The body here described as more 'fidèle' than the 'esprit', which also brings an evaluative dimension to the Narrator's comment: what is suggested here is that the 'esprit' which 'n'aurait jamais dû oublier' in the first place,

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[14] The etymology of 'animal' derives from Latin etymon *anima* (n.), which is defined by the *OED* as 'the animating principle in living things, the soul; some part or aspect of the soul, esp. the irrational part of the soul as distinguished from the rational mind' and as 'the vital principle of life, physical life' as opposed to *animus*, 'the spiritual, reasoning, willing principle, the human will'. *Oxford English Dictionary,* 'anima, n.' <http://oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/7734> (Oxford University Press, http://oed.com) [Accessed 6 November 2012].

[15] Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 240-45.

has forgotten, and it is the sensations that at this first stage attach him back to the world outside the dream. At first such a comment seems to resort to the Cartesian separation between the body and the mind, but looking at this phenomenon of waking up as a whole, we see how the two in fact collaborate inseparably in order to bring the subject into a conscious state of mind and restore the 'knowable' self.

Next, in steps memory: 'le souvenir' comes to the Narrator's assistance, pulling him out of the first 'je' – 'du néant d'où je n'aurais pu sortir tout seul' – and leads him into the process of recomposing 'peu à peu les traits originaux de mon moi' (*RTP I,* 6). '*Mon* moi' here suggests that there are indeed several selves from which the Narrator is to draw in recomposing his current self (and that some of these selves seem to indeed represent a kind of *non*-moi) in order to resort to individuality again. 'Les traits originaux' seem to suggest that there are some fundamental, pre-existing characteristics in our being (but which nevertheless need to be *re*composed). However, instead of reading 'les traits originaux' as 'characteristics,' we may also consider them as original *marks* of the self that are being drawn back together to form a coherent whole.

'Traits' in this sense may suggests a metaphor of inscription: we may regard the 'non-moi' who is waking up as a foundation, a space, or a canvas, on which our cognition is able to reassemble the marks of our previous experiences and rearrange them in the face of our new experiences. Through a metaphor drawn from visual arts, such 'recomposition' could be considered as a process similar to that of adding new layers of paint, colours and shades, into a painting. The idea of a nominal self ('qui je suis') as a finished painting parallels interestingly to the proposition presented in Chapter Three about certain 'auratic distance' in visual representation: how a painting in a way *fixes* our perspective and 'trains' our eyes to see in a particular way. In this chapter, however, I focus explicitly on literary art, as it seems that the process of reading offers the most fertile ground to examine the process of what happens in between the two 'je's.

In the opening scene, the process of recomposing the self seems to resemble the experience reading of literature in many respects. When we read fictional texts we shift between the real and the imagined, somewhat in a similar manner to the way we sometimes very gradually move from the state of dreaming to the state of being awake.

In the Narrator's observation 'je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j'étais', the interim between the two 'je's, between 'le sentiment de l'existence' and the nominal 'self' seems to bear resemblance to what happens within the process of reading a book and a novel in particular – to how the reader's view of the book at hand changes between reading the first pages of a novel and the last ones. The act of reading seems to bring out the connection between the more 'direct' immediate experiences in-the-world and something obscure but essential and permanent within the reader – 'dans sa simplicité première, le sentiment de l'existence' (*RTP I,* 5) if you like – which needs to be brought to light not merely by seeking it but by creating also (*RTP I,* 45). I now turn to look at these parallels between reading 'en soi-même' and the process of 'becoming oneself' – the movement between the first 'je' and 'qui j'étais' – in more detail.

6.2. Being in-between: Discovering Books, Creating Reality

When the Narrator presents his 'theory' of reading, the clause 'lire *en* eux-mêmes/ soi-même' is repeated three times, which prompts us to consider the role of the preposition or adverbial pronoun 'en' here. It seems to suggest that whether we interpret 'le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes' as the readers 'reading (with)in themselves' or 'reading for or about themselves', in any case the Narrator is not promising his readers a means to directly 'read themselves' ('se lire eux-mêmes'). Since we are looking at the experience of reading as self-understanding, this a distinction worth pointing out, as simply 'reading oneself' would indicate a that the self can be grasped conceptually as an object and somehow owned or known as a whole.

The recurring use of 'en' here seems to point to the idea of selfhood as a *space,* in which the subject constantly interacts with the unfamiliar, new, and the other, and yet is always assisted by a web of personal associations, memories and sensations deriving from past experience. I propose that the 'soi-même' in the Narrator's agenda should indeed be considered not so much as an agent or a proprietor, but as a space – a mental and bodily space in which experiences take place and take shape.[16] This idea is supported by a

[16] This idea that life events only turn into 'la réalité' when they enter the self-space, sometimes a long after the actual event has taken place, is illustrated germanely in the context of the Narrator's 'intermittences du cœur' which I discuss shortly.

range of comments the Narrator makes throughout the *Recherche.* For example, in describing his relationship to the Méséglise and Guermantes ways in *Du Côté de chez Swann I,* he talks about 'des gisements profonds de mon sol mental'[17] (*RTP I,* 182), and later on in *Sodome et Gomorrhe II* about 'l'existence de notre corps, semblable pour nous à un vase où notre spiritualité serait enclose' (*RTP III,* 153-4). The Narrator's spatial imagery also prompts us to consider another alternative meaning of 'propres lecteurs': they could be readers who are 'soigneux, qui entretiennent les objets, les lieux qui [les] entourent'[18] – conscientious readers who 'look after' things and the environment which they 'inhabit'.

If our past, as the Narrator suggests, forms the 'gisements profonds' (*RTP I,* 182) of our mental soil, it seems these layers of experience – the unique combination of 'minerals' which underlies our perception of the world – at least partly determine how the 'seeds' of new experience take root and prosper; the rest is up to the reader's skills of cultivation, as it were. This imagery reveals something essential about the nature of the Proustian experience of reading 'en soi-même', too: it is never our intellect or our will alone, nor merely our previous experience, that dictates the outcomes of aesthetic reading. Rather, the self-revelatory potential subsists in the way our intellect perceives, interacts with and adapts (or not) to our intuitive reactions to the text that are fundamentally based on our experience in the world.

To acknowledge this contingent nature of reading, especially reading 'aesthetically', also resonates with the hermeneutic view that language is not merely a tool with which we conceptualise the world, but a precondition for understanding in a much more intrinsic sense. As Gadamer puts it, 'Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.'[19]

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[17] For example William Carter discusses these geological analogies in Proust, noting how these images 'applied to the artist function on a vertical axis' on which 'upward movement gives the artist a larger view of the society and the world, allowing him to gauge accurately the spectacle of human folly and [...] explore the vistas of time and space', while 'a descent along the vertical axis into one's own inner self makes possible the discovery of truths about emotions, memory, art [...] and allows access to 'the region of the "moi profond"'. Carter, p. 218.

[18] http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries/french/propre. See 'propre', sense 2: 'qui est soigneux, qui entretient les objets, les lieux qui l'entourent' [Accessed 3 August 2012].

[19] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 63.

Similarly, in Proust's novel, language and unmediated experience, instead of rivalling with each other, are inseparably intermingled, and the collaboration between these two modes of experience (the abstract, linguistic, mediated one and the concrete, sensuous, direct one) offers the key to reading oneself. The personal, singular experiences in-the-world through which the reader approaches the text make the reading experience unique, and, in this way, they also become a proof of the existence of a unique reader-subject – of a self.

Towards the end of Proust's novel, the underlying scepticism regarding language's capacity to mediate truths starts to break down. The 'disclosive' potential of language is recognised by the Narrator in *Le Temps retrouvé,* and he ultimately considers literary presentation as a means to convey things as 'réels sans être actuels, idéaux sans être abstraits' (*RTP IV,* 451). The idea that our experiences are not 'colonised' or 'captivated' by language is suspended, and this is replaced by an altogether opposing view that language can actually 'dress up' and 'safe-guard' our experiences.

In discussing 'le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes', the Narrator reflects his own role as a writer and concludes that instead of building his book 'ambitieusement comme une cathédrale', he will craft it 'tout simplement comme une robe'(*RTP IV,* 610). If writing a book is like making a dress, then reading it may be regarded as something similar to wearing one. This metaphor, in a way, also breaks down the subject-object opposition between the reader and the text: if the reader indeed ends up 'wearing' the text, the artwork-object becomes a part of the subject, in so far as what we wear affects the way we behave, look, and feel. And yet a garment does not transform us completely; there is something essential of our being which remains the same whatever we 'wear'.

In view of the Narrator's metaphors of the book as a dress and 'les verres grossissants', we may deem the Narrator's proposed 'moyen de lire *en* eux-mêmes' not so much as a model or method to 'read the self' but as hermeneutical experience of the self in the fullest sense: as disclosure rather than designation. As Gadamer points out, 'the nature of hermeneutical experience is not that something is outside and desires admission' but 'rather, we are possessed by something [our past experience] and *precisely by means of*

it we are opened up to the new, the different, the true.'[20] The idea that the familiar, lived experience forms the basis for any new, non-familiar experience (as well as always contributes to our imagination) seems to resonate with the Narrator's remark in *Le Temps retrouvé* about how a great book needs not to be 'invented' by the author but is something which pre-exists within us, which is 'à la fois [...] nécessaire et cachée', and which we need to, 'comme nous ferions pour une loi de la nature [...] *découvrir' (RTP IV,* 459, my emphasis).

According to this line of thought, both the 'actively' registered experiences of the reader and, perhaps even more crucially, those experiences that the reader has had but not yet registered as his or hers, affect the reading experience. The latter in particular seem crucial in making the readers 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610), as it is these unmarked impressions in our 'sol mental'(*RTP I,* 182) which our encounter with the text may 'dig up'. Instead of fracturing the reader's sense of self, these 'pre-individual' experiences can be regarded as something which *together* with the cognitively 'recognised' experiences form the unique standing point from which a reader approaches the text. [21] Indeed it seems, in view of Proust's novel, that these experiences that our 'nominal' self is not yet aware of may, in fact, enhance the sense of individuality and reality when they are realised (or indeed *released*) through an aesthetic experience.

This sense of 'la réalité' in the aesthetic experience prompts us to consider the links between reality and literature. The proposition that 'nous ne sommes nullement libres devant l'œuvre d'art' because it 'pre-exists' us was discussed in the previous chapter – the way our perception is always 'stylised', as Crowther puts it, through our previous experiences. [22] The idea that a book is not created but 'discovered', whereas reality and the past cannot be simply 'discovered' but always need to be created also ('Chercher? pas seulement: créer.' *RTP I,* 45), seems, at first, contradictory to say the least. One way to start to unravel this apparent paradox is to acknowledge the recurring difference (and

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[20] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 9 (my emphasis).

[21] A good example of this are the Narrator's 'Dostoyevskian' impressions discussed in the previous chapter, which shows how the reader's experience in Proust does not merely happen and produce meanings on the level of thought but is tied to the immediate reality in which the reading takes place.

[22] Crowther, p.172 (my emphasis).

occasional clash) between 'le fait' and 'la réalité' in Proust's novel. This difference is most wonderfully described in the context of 'les intermittences du cœur' *(RTP III,* 152-7), to which the Narrator later refers in *Le Temps retrouvé,* remarking how he had 'perdu [sa] grand-mère en réalité bien des mois après l'avoir perdu en fait' (*RTP IV,* 491).

The intermittences illustrate the overwhelming sense of 'la réalité' experienced in the present moment – the realisation that the grandmother is gone forever and the intense suffering that comes with this realisation, 'la sécheresse de l'âme' (*RTP III,* 153). And yet at the same time, 'les intermittences du cœur' point to the idea that the Narrator expresses much earlier in *Du côté de chez Swann I* of how 'la réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire' (*RTP I,* 182). The grandmother's absence is realised through the memory of her presence: as the Narrator states, 'je retrouvais dans un souvenir involontaire et complet la réalité vivante' (*RTP III,* 153). However, the Narrator also notes that in order for the impression or the memory to actually become 'réalité', it needs to be recreated by our cognitive faculties: 'Cette réalité n'existe pas pour nous tant qu'elle n'a pas été *recréée* par notre pensée' (*RTP III,* 153). What is also emphasised in this process is the actual experience of becoming aware, which takes place in the present moment: thus, even if 'la réalité' is only formed 'dans la mémoire,' it requires movement between the past and present moment, the movement of 'la pensée', to emerge.[23]

'Les intermittences du cœur' strike the Narrator with an overwhelming sense of being alive and seem to point to some kind of unity of the self or selves across time – unity, which does not rely on conceptual understanding or coherence but one which seems rather to be based on emotions and impressions we gather and carry around in the 'container' of our body throughout our life:

> Car aux troubles de la mémoire sont liées les intermittences du cœur. C'est sans doute l'existence de notre corps, semblable pour nous à un vase où notre

[23] This idea that comprehension requires memory and re-creation was discussed earlier in Chapter Four in the context of music; listening to the Vinteuil Sonata played by Mme Swann, the Narrator remarks: 'Aussi n'a-t-on pas tort de dire "entendre la première fois". Si l'on n'avait vraiment, comme on l'a cru, rien distingué à la première audition, la deuxième, la troisième seraient autant de premières, et il n'y aurait pas de raison pour qu'on comprît quelque chose de plus à la dixième. Probablement *ce qui fait défaut, la première fois, ce n'est pas la compréhension, mais la mémoire.' (JF I),* 520 (my emphasis).

> spiritualité serait enclose, qui nous induit à supposer que tous nos biens intérieurs, nos joies passées, toutes nos douleurs sont perpétuellement en notre possession.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu III,* 153-4

It is the fact of the existence of our body which, according to the Narrator, *makes us think* of our 'spiritualité' as something enclosed, but the Narrator's expression here – the way the word 'semblable' followed by a conditional ('serait') casts doubt upon the opinion that is being expressed – indicates that this might still be an erroneous conclusion. There is thus, at this point, a certain ambivalence as to whether the Narrator truly believes that our past experiences are in fact 'contained' within us. This skepticism seems not to be overcome until at the very end of *Le Temps retrouvé* in fact, where we witness the Narrator's deliberation of the artistic process and his growing fear of death and the decay of the body, arrive at this very conclusion – that the mind and the body are inseparably interlinked: 'Car le danger intérieur, comme celui d'une hémorragie cérébrale, est extérieur aussi, étant du corps. Et avoir un corps c'est la grande menace pour l'esprit.' (*RTP IV,* 613)

This comment also links to what was said earlier about the 'propre lecteurs' and the idea of ownership, as the Narrator's words here seem to suggest that we are in some ways the *proprietors* of our experiences. However, we can detect here a similar kind of emphasis that is used in the Narrator's 'moyen de lire *en* eux-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610): just as we are not promised 'le moyen de nous lire nous-mêmes', the Narrator's remark here does not suggest that we *actively* possess our past experiences (he does not say 'nous les possédons') but rather that these are 'perpétuellement *en* notre possession' (*RTP III,* 153-4, my emphasis). In fact, it seems that these experiences are, for most of the time, inaccessible to us – at least in this intense sense of yielding to us 'la réalité vivante' (*SG*, 153).

Thus, the intermittence passages also manifest how realisation, the process of understanding, is based neither on mere intellectual awareness, 'la pensée', nor on memory alone: 'les faits' have long since given the Narrator the knowledge that his grandmother is dead, but it is the memory of her presence and not of her death which leads him to understand what has happened. In *Du côté de chez Swann I,* discussing the

Méséglise and Guermantes ways, the Narrator contemplates the role of 'la pensée' and the mediation of experience as follows:

> Sans doute [la vie intellectuelle] progresse en nous insensiblement et les vérités qui en ont changé pour nous le sens et l'aspect, qui nous ont ouvert de nouveaux chemins, nous en préparions depuis longtemps la découverte; mais c'était sans le savoir; et elles ne datent pour nous que du jour, de la minute où elles nous sont devenues visibles.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 181

The Narrator thus proposes that there are certain 'vérités' which we can access through 'la pensée'. While it is suggested here that there are 'truths' to be discovered (and in Proust, 'les vérités' seem to most often refer to the effects of our own subjective experiences in the past that we have yet to acknowledge, rather than to 'universal truths'), it seems that these truths as such are not somehow the same as 'reality'. 'La réalité' resides *in the process* of arriving at these truths, our travels across 'toutes les diverses vies que nous menons parallèlement' (*RTP I,* 182), in a certain mode of being 'in-between'.

While 'les faits' provide the framework for our nominal self ('qui je suis'), the pre-subjectified 'inexperiences' (such as the moment of waking up or regaining consciousness) seem to reside beyond 'les faits', creating otherness within the one who experiences – creating the difference between the first 'je' and the second, as it were. Thus, the encounter with otherness (both in the sense of the other within the self, as described in the opening scene of Proust's novel, and the other of/ in the text when we are reading a book) 'discloses the reality of alternative possibilities not presently [one's] own but which might yet become [one's] own'. [24] Understanding, from the perspective of hermeneutic ontology, is not a result but, as Nicholas Davey puts it, 'an event [which] does not merely interpret the world but changes it'.[25] This approach may also shed light on the Narrator's proposition that reality needs to be created and can never simply be discovered.

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[24] Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2006), p. 15.

[25] Davey, p. xiv.

But if reality and self-understanding are both creative processes and cannot be pinned down to objectively graspable 'faits', what is, then, the process of recomposing 'peu à peu les traits originaux de mon moi' (*RTP I,* 5-6) based on? Is it the existence of the body or maybe that of involuntary memory (as far as the two are inseparable in Proust) which allows the subject a space in which to experience his or her 'spiritualité' as something unified? At this point, the idea of a 'livre intérieur' which needs to be discovered (*RTP IV,* 459) becomes crucial: the Narrator's plea to his readers to ask themselves 'si les mots qu'ils lisent en eux-mêmes sont bien ceux que j'ai écrits' (*RTP IV,* 610) suggests that reading is a trans-subjective process in which the difference between the self and the other in fact starts to break down. This process of highly subjective evaluation, then, does not necessarily require but may *lead to* the reader becoming more fully aware of his or her 'point of departure' – of the person he or she has been and is at the time of reading. According to hermeneutic tradition, this is an essential part of the process that eventually helps us to define our unique standing-point from which we arrive into this 'disclosive' space of the in-between.

Reading in hermeneutic practice does not thus stop at recognising the other and then dispelling the apparent difference between the self and the other. Rather, reading is a process which continues beyond this point as communication between the otherness and the sameness and also prompts the reader to ask what his or her sense of familiarity or difference is in fact based on. The Narrator's idea of the readers reading the same words that he has written 'en eux-mêmes' does not necessarily mean the reader's individuality 'exploding' in the face of the text, 'la différence entre les deux textes pouvant être souvent imputée non à l'auteur mais au lecteur' (*RTP IV,* 490). This remark suggests that there must be something within the reader which makes them respond to a text in a particular way. If it is indeed the reader who ultimately makes one reading different from another, the question of how this happens far from inconsequential.

To examine the question of how the readers appreciate and appropriate a text, let us return now to the comparison presented earlier in this chapter of how reading a book may be considered parallel to the process that takes place between the first 'je' and 'qui j'étais'. In the beginning of a book, the reader is faced with strangeness, otherness and undertakes a task of not only imagining but making sense of this otherness. The

Narrator, waking up, is in a similar position when 'le souvenir – non encore du lieu où j'étais, mais de quelques-uns de ceux que j'avais habités et où j'aurais pu être – venait à moi comme un secours d'en haut pour me tirer du néant d'où je n'aurais pu sortir tout seul' (*RTP I,* 5). In alike manner, the reader starts to unravel the textual 'space' into which he or she has entered, by searching amongst 'quelques-uns de [les lieux] que j'avais habités et où j'aurais pu être' – that is, though contrasting and comparing the experience of the text to his or her previous experience of other texts or outside the text.

In this way, page by page, the reader's past (personal) experience and his or her experience of other texts becomes intertwined in the text at hand. Evidence of life experience having been woven into the experience of text this way can be found for example in a passage in *Le Temps retrouvé* where the Narrator, while waiting in the Guermantes library to be let into a party, comes across *François le Champi* and a book by Bergotte he used to read as a boy. With *François le Champi* he suddenly comes face to face with 'l'étranger [qui] était l'enfant que j'étais alors, que le livre venait de susciter en moi' (*RTP IV,* 463) and browsing in the volume by Bergotte takes him back to a particular day of reading the book: '[D]u volume lui-même, la neige qui couvrait les Champs-Elysées, le jour où je le lus, n'a pas été enlevée. Je la vois toujours' (*RTP IV,* 465). This passage brings out both the sensuous and self-revelatory dimensions of the act of reading, and I shall discuss it in more detail shortly.

It is once again demonstrated through these reading-related memories of the Narrator that the appropriation of a text is never a project for the conscious mind alone. In an aesthetic experience, it is precisely the liberation from the continuous striving for knowledge and clarity which may enable the vestiges of the self that have not been glimpsed in a long time to surface and thus take us closer to a fuller understanding of our being. This part of the Narrator's proposal links to the Gadamerian idea that 'it is not so much our judgements as it is our prejudices that constitute our being' – and Gadamer uses the word 'prejudice' here in its original non-negative sense as simply referring to 'the conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us'.[26] While reading something for the first time evokes impressions rather than necessarily memories, these impressions are never detached

[26] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* p. 9.

from ‘the conditions whereby [the text] says something to us’ and therefore the reading experience, especially when revisiting a text, can reveal to us what is the *same* in the experience of a past self and the current one.

This thematic prominence of ‘le souvenir’ in Proust’s novel seems to challenge the view of ‘exploding’ subjectivity that for example Agamben takes in suggesting that in Proust ‘there is no longer really any subject, but only [...] an infinite drifting and casual colliding of objects and sensations.’[27] As we already saw in Part One of the thesis, in order to truly investigate the role of memory in selfhood we need to consider it in view of the ways in which ‘le souvenir’ renders itself to us – both in mediation through language and in establishing the parameters of our experience of the tangible, sensuous reality.[28] Even if memory alone cannot help us to understand who we are, the emphasis that Proust’s novel gives especially to involuntary memory as a provider of a supreme (even if fleeting) sense of selfhood, seems to be recognised, developed and understood. In the last part of this chapter, I examine the role of such ‘souvenir’ and the sensuous impressions attached to it in the reading process.

6.3. ‘La lecture prolongée du livre’: Reading-in-the-World

What has been suggested in this chapter so far is that the process of reading literature – by making us go ‘outside’ ourselves, opening us to the otherness of the text – may both reveal what is familiar to us and lead to a new, enhanced understanding of ourselves. This familiarity through which the new and unfamiliar is approached seems to be largely based on the personal social and psychological circumstances of the reader-subject as well as the socio-cultural (intellectual) traditions to which the reader belongs. However, ‘interiority is only one aspect of the reading experience,’ as Adam Watt notes in analysing the Narrator’s reading experiences in the Combray garden.[29] This passage, together with the Narrator’s memories of *François le Champi* and the novel by Bergotte

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[27] Agamben, p. 42.

[28] As Joshua Landy remarks, memory in Proust ‘offers [a] sudden tantalising glimpse of a possible identity consistent over time.’ Landy, p. 113.

[29] Watt, p. 37.

described in *Le Temps retrouvé*, call to our attention another 'affective' dimension of the experience of reading: the role of sensuous experiences during the act of reading.

As the examples from the *Recherche* in the previous chapters demonstrate, the act of reading (and especially the reading of literary texts) is far from indifferent to the sensory stimuli drawn from the physical surroundings in which reading takes place. On the one hand, this dimension of the reading experience, being applicable to everyone and anyone who reads, seems to make it less dependent on the reader's socio-cultural context and 'abstract' cultural models of thinking. On the other hand, the sensuous impressions attached to the experience also make each reader's experience more personal, adding even more variables to the experiences between individual readers.[30]

This leads us to consider further parallels between the reading experience and the process of 'becoming oneself': the Narrator, in moving from a pre-subjectified existence ('le sentiment de l'existence comme il peut frémir au fond d'un animal' (*RTP I,* 5)) on to recomposing the 'traits originaux', first through the 'knowledge' of the body. He starts by observing his surroundings through sensuous impressions, which his intellect and memory then gradually arrange into the 'narrative' of the nominal self ('qui j'étais'). In the same way, the reader, constantly subject to physical sensations and time during the act of reading, moves from the 'blank' landscape of the first pages of the book into a 'living' narrative, by intertwining into the text the sensuous, emotive and temporal impressions evoked during the reading experience and drawing from what has been experienced prior to it.

This phenomenological dimension of reading seems particularly relevant to the question of what kinds of memories a book is able to evoke. In *Le Temps retrouvé,* the Narrator notes how 'un livre que nous lûmes ne rest[e] pas unis à jamais seulement à ce qu'il y avait autour de nous; il le reste aussi fidèlement à ce que nous étions alors' (*RTP IV,* 464). With *François le Champi,* he comes face to face with 'l'étranger [qui] était moi-même, c'était l'enfant que j'étais alors, que le livre venait de susciter en moi' (*RTP IV,* 463) while with the Bergotte novel he is not able to 'retrouver les pages que j'aimais

[30] This kind of individualisation of texts through the reader's life experience was already touched upon in the previous chapter, in the context of the Narrator's definition of 'Dostoyevskian'.

tant' (*RTP IV,* 465). The sense of self here seems to be inherently linked to the reader's emotive reality at the time of the reading and, especially in the context of the Bergotte novel, also to the sensuous reality of the reading experience. Skimming through the pages seems to make the Narrator simultaneously aware of the strangeness within the self *and,* by making him reflect on the multiple stages through which he has become who he is now, also yield to him a sense of a continuum between now and what came before.

The Narrator refers to this experience of continuity as 'la lecture prolongée du livre' (*RTP IV,* 465), acknowledging the 'long-term' effects of the reading experience: the ways in which a book we have read can both 'safeguard' experiences from our past for us as well as function as a catalyst for new understanding, by having made us open to the otherness of the text in the first place and then to the change that has taken place in our very selves between now and when we first read it. In other words, a book can reveal to the reader both what is the same and what is different between past and present on a very personal level, because of the way the reading experience has been 'animated' through hitherto partly unconscious or unremarked experiences.; this kind of 'personification' is the germ of the self-revelatory potential that the aesthetic reading process may offer to the reader. This tendency is manifested in the Narrator's own literary impressions as a reader in the novel, as well as, of course, in what a novel like the *Recherche* itself may conjure up for its readers.

This sensuous and contextualised dimension of the reading experience thus offers another angle on the paradox of how we can arrive at self-understanding by initially moving away from the self. Let us consider the 'escapist' appeal of literary texts for example, to which the young Narrator himself is by no means impartial: reading in Combray, he tries to forget 'des incidents médiocres de [son] existence personnelle' and replace them with 'une vie d'aventures et d'aspirations étranges au sein d'un pays arrosé d'eaux vives,' (*RTP I,* 87). At first, it seems paradoxical that this kind of endeavour could ever result in an enhanced sense of selfhood. However, it is his own dreams and aspirations that keep cropping up and developing while his imagination is being 'fed' by the books. What remains with him throughout the years is not so much the contents of these books, but the emotive and sensuous imprint these hours of reading

have left on his mind:

> Beaux après-midi du dimanche sous le marronnier du jardin de Combray, soigneusement vidés par moi des incidents médiocres de mon existence personnelle que j'y avais remplacés par une vie d'aventures et d'aspirations étranges au sein d'un pays arrosé d'eaux vives, vous m'évoquez encore cette vie quand je pense à vous et vous la *contenez* en effet pour l'avoir peu à peu contournée et enclose — tandis que je progressais dans ma lecture et que tombait la chaleur du jour — dans le cristal successif, lentement changeant et traversé de feuillages, de vos heures silencieuses, sonores, odorantes et limpides.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 87 (my emphasis)

This passage prompts the question of what we actually tend to remember of a reading experience. For the Narrator, these 'heures silencieuses, sonores, odorantes et limpides,' contain the aspirations and dreams that reading once mobilised in his young mind rather than the contents of the books he was reading. Finding one's past self in a text once read is not a straightforward process of simply rereading the words on the page, but rather attached to the entire psycho-physical reality of the reading situation.

The following excerpt from *Le Temps retrouvé*, in which the Narrator finds a copy of the Bergotte novel in the Guermantes library, describes beautifully the kind of 'involuntary' sensuous dimension that has been evoked in the reader during the act of reading:

> Certes, pour bien des livres de mon enfance, et, hélas, pour certains livres de Bergotte lui-même, quand un soir de fatigue il m'arrive de les prendre, ce n'est pourtant que comme j'aurais pris un train dans l'espoir de me reposer par la vision de choses différentes et en respirant l'atmosphère d'autrefois. Mais il arrive que cette évocation recherchée se trouve entravée au contraire par la lecture prolongée du livre. Il en est un [livre] de Bergotte […] lu jadis en entier un jour d'hiver où je ne pouvais voir Gilberte, et où je ne peux réussir à retrouver les phrases que j'aimais tant. Certains mots me feraient croire que ce sont elles, mais c'est impossible. Où serait donc la beauté que je leur trouvais? Mais du volume lui-même la neige qui couvrait les Champs-Elysées le jour où je le lus n'a pas été enlevée, je la vois toujours.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 464-5

The subject matter is not even mentioned, and 'les phrases que j'aimais tant' cannot be found; instead, the Narrator faces the memory of the snow that covered the Champs-

Elysées and made it impossible for him to go and play with Gilberte in the park, making him stay in and read his books. Thus, instead of discovering his previous self or state of mind simply by decoding the words on the page, it seems that a crucial part of the revelatory potential of a reading experience is in fact attached to the sensuous impressions drawn from the world outside the book at the time of reading: browsing in the book does not only remind the Narrator of Gilberte but takes him back to the actual sensuous universe of those snowy winter days when he was reading it. The question, then, is: if the memory of the book is not traceable in the words themselves and we cannot access the previous self by reading the words on the page but only through impressions we have attached to them, how does a book improve on eating another madeleine?

Let us consider this question further through another description of how a text has become charged with highly personal associations. Just before finding the Bergotte book, the Narrator has been browsing in a copy of *François le Champi*, a book in which his 'souvenirs d'enfance et de famille étaient tendrement mêlés' (*RTP IV,* 463), and remarks that

> Aussi ce livre que ma mère m'avait lu haut à Combray presque jusqu'au matin, avait-il gardé pour moi tout le charme de cette nuit-là. Certes, la 'plume' de George Sand, pour prendre une expression de Brichot qui aimait tant dire qu'un livre était écrit "d'une plume alerte", ne me semblait pas du tout, comme elle avait paru si longtemps à ma mère avant qu'elle modelât lentement ses goûts littéraires sur les miens, une plume magique. Mais c'était une plume que sans le vouloir j'avais électrisée comme s'amusent souvent à faire les collégiens, et voici que mille riens de Combray, et que je n'apercevais plus depuis longtemps, sautaient légèrement d'eux-mêmes et venaient à la queue leu leu se suspendre au bec aimanté, en une chaîne interminable et tremblante de souvenirs.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 463

A book does not 'contain' the past in itself but rather 'guards' it. It is the 'mille riens', the insignificant details that have been attached to it unintentionally ('sans le vouloir') that seem to hold the key to 'la réalité' of those hours we spent reading, after which we were never quite the same again. This passage bears a striking resemblance to the Narrator's comparison of memories to Japanese paper flowers in the madeleine passage in *Combray*: the 'magnetised' nib of the writer's pen here produces an expansion of

detail in a somewhat similar fashion of 'la queue leu leu' to those Japanese paper flowers which, when placed in water, open out, 'se contournent, se colorent, se différencient, deviennent des fleurs, des maisons, des personnages consistants et reconnaissables.' (*RTP I,* 47)

There is, however, a difference between the emergence of the past from the pages of a novel and from one's teacup: in the madeleine passage, where 'Combray et ses environs, tout cela qui prend forme et solidité est sorti, ville et jardins, de [sa] tasse de thé (*RTP I,* 47), the Narrator feels the connection but cannot explain this connection. The impressions produced by the pen come somehow more organised and collected than those produced by the madeleine: the magnetised nib represents reconfiguring experience into a structure as opposed to the expansive profusion of Japanese paper flowers.

This shift from the flower to the pen also marks the great thematic shift in the novel as a whole between *Combray* and *Le Temps retrouvé*: from memory to art and to the possibility of accessing the former via the latter. With the pen, the nib of which has collected things, the explanation is embedded in the way we ourselves have linked abstract representation to our own emotional, sensuous and psychological reality. It is the writer's 'plume' but the *reader* is the one who charges it with electricity, and it the creative work that the reader (as much as the writer) needs to put into encoding the truths or the past from a book that makes a book a more powerful 'vessel' than a madeleine.

Thus, as the above examples show, access to one's past is not granted simply by re-reading a text. Rather, it only seems to become available through (non-deliberate) evocation of the impressions associated with a book at the time of reading:

> Ce que nous appelons la réalité est un certain rapport entre ces sensations et ces souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément – rapport que supprime une simple vision cinématographique, laquelle s'éloigne par là d'autant plus du vrai qu'elle prétend se borner à lui – rapport unique que l'écrivain doit retrouver pour en enchaîner à jamais dans sa phrase les deux termes différents. [...] [La] vérité ne commencera qu'au moment où l'écrivain prendra deux objets différents, posera leur rapport [...] et les enfermera dans les anneaux nécessaires d'un beau style. Même, ainsi que la vie, quand en rapprochant une qualité commune à deux

> sensations, il dégagera leur essence commune en les réunissant l'une et l'autre pour les soustraire aux contingences du temps, dans une métaphore.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 468

This passage illustrates the parallel ways in which 'la réalité' is revealed to us in both life and literature: it resides within 'un certain rapport entre ces sensations et les souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément' and this rapport being grasped by the one who is 'at the centre' of these sensations and memories. This relation cannot be comprehended through a mere 'cinematographic vision' that would only set forth one 'truth' at the expense of others, thus destroying the very possibility of genuine disclosure, the understanding of what is 'in-between' these different experiences.

The Narrator notes how 'la vérité' only *begins* when the writer recognises the relationship – the concurrent similarity and the difference between two things – and then links these two things together in words. One of the means of literary language to embrace this relation of sensations and memories is a metaphor, which in Proust, as Genette remarks, 'n'est pas un ornement, mais *l'instrument nécessaire* à une restitution, par le style, de la vision des essences, parce qu'elle est l'équivalent stylistique de l'expérience psychologique de la mémoire involontaire qui seule permet, en rapprochant deux sensations séparées dans le temps, de dégager leur essence commune par le miracle d'une analogie'.[31] In the reading experience, then, the power of metaphor resides precisely in the fact that this kind of creative combination of words and concepts always necessitates 'opening up' by the reader. Heidegger calls this process 'the setting-itself-into-work truth' and deems it as the very 'essence of art'.[32] The reading process thus becomes an essential part of releasing these 'suspended' truths – truths that can only ever *begin* in a text.

While in the frame of deconstructionist theories the indeterminability within language often seems to result in some kind of deferral or dissemination of meaning, in the hermeneutic tradition it is what invites one to participate through the process of interpretation, to experience language as an integral part of how one experiences things

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[31] Genette, p. 40 (my emphasis).

[32] Heidegger, 'The Origin of Work of Art' p. 184.

and one's own self. The task of interpretation, which is inherently connected to the use of language, is precisely what makes the experience of reading particularly interesting from the self-revelatory angle: the freedom of interpretation (and on the other hand also the *necessity* of interpretation) in reading always compels the reader to choose, which, in turn, leads to communication with oneself.

The openness that marks literary language and the reading experience is not thus openness in the sense that it would allow the reader to project some specific interpretations on to the text – this would, in a way, be like reading 'la réalité' through cinematographic vision. Rather, the openness that an artwork allows us and that is required in the process of genuine self-understanding is openness in its most intrinsic hermeneutical sense: being open to the extent of being vulnerable – openness as something which 'may lead towards the possibilities of translation and transcendence but such a path cannot be taken without the risk of transforming one's self-understanding and hence one's relations with others'.[33]

The concept of openness in hermeneutics has been criticised for being, as Davey puts it, 'openness that is only open to opportunities for imposing one's own sense of meaning and purpose upon the environment' while not really 'responding' to otherness; this criticism is fundamentally flawed however, as philosophical hermeneutics does not understand interpretation as 'an epistemological schema or projection [but rather as] a process of involvement and engagement'.[34] This kind of openness includes the acknowledgement of otherness, not its suppression, and thus enables true communication with the other. The empowering effects of hermeneutic openness are fundamentally based on the ways in which it is 'not only open to the other but to the difference that the other is able to open within ourselves,' thus allowing 'a little more than a liberal tolerance of other points of view'.[35] This aspect of hermeneutic and phenomenological practice also answers to Guattari's critique of the assumed 'réductionnisme systématique' which would 'rétrécir ses objets à une pure transparence

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[33] Davey, pp. 228-9.

[34] Davey, p. 225.

[35] Davey, p. 228.

intentionelle'.[36]

It may seem paradoxical indeed that we should arrive at clearer or more real self-understanding through someone else's mediated experience of the world, but once we acknowledge how much more the process of reading is than mere *reception* of mediation, we may consider the process as one through which the readers are able to both read and (re)create their subjectivity. The reader of literature is not merely an active participant in transferring meanings or ideas expressed in the text, but actually provides the ultimate space for truth-making and self-creation to happen. The phenomenological approach suggests we may actually feel ourselves being a part of the world and coherent only through acknowledging that separation between our experience and its representation is in fact artificial. Subjectivity, like a life experience, therefore, is not something that simply is 'out there' (or even 'in there') to be represented, but rather representation is part and parcel of our subjectivity and the way we experience things.

However, just as the familiar can only be grasped through difference (e.g. readers needs to go 'outside' themselves to see what lies within themselves), the difference cannot be grasped without the familiar, and this is the germ of Gadamerian hermeneutics, the true locus of which is 'the in-between'.[37] Thus, rather than the subject merging into the other, the process of understanding it is a mode of 'being in-between' the familiar and the different. The process of reading that may result in enhanced self-understanding is not a subjectivist exercise of self-confirmation, carried out by projecting one's beliefs and prejudices on the other; rather, its germ lies precisely in allowing the possibility of transformation – not *by* but *with* the other. As Davy puts it,

> The narratives we inhabit are rarely singular. That an other is able to offer me a transformation of myself and to bring into fruition aspects of myself that were present within me and yet withheld from me does not necessarily mean that I will travel the particular path that they open. [38]

Thus hermeneutic openness does not lead into de-subjectification or disappearance of

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[36] Guattari, p. 26.

[37] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p. 295.

[38] Davey, p. 229 (my emphasis).

selfhood either: it relies on the idea that 'it is experience itself that opens us to the possibility of further experience' and that the 'complete openness of outlook' is a contradiction in terms and 'would render us hermeneutically blind'.[39] What this means to the reader-subject, then, is that it is his or her experiences (both direct everyday experiences and mediated experiences) that form a certain 'sol mental' (*RTP I,* 82) into which the new and unfamiliar experience may be sown.

We can only understand the transformation that has taken place within us in retrospect – that is, in time – and in this sense 'la réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire' (*RTP I,* 182), as the Narrator suggests already in *Du Côté de chez Swann I* in contemplating his walks along the Méséglise and Guermantes ways:

> Mais c'est surtout comme à des gisements profonds de mon sol mental, comme aux terrains résistants sur lesquels je m'appuie encore, que je dois penser au côté de Méséglise et au côté de Guermantes. C'est parce que je croyais aux choses, aux êtres, tandis que je les parcourais, que les choses, les êtres qu'ils m'ont fait connaître, sont les seuls que je prenne encore au sérieux et qui me donnent encore de la joie. Soit que la foi qui crée soit tarie en moi, soit que la réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire, les fleurs qu'on me montre aujourd'hui pour la première fois ne me semblent pas de vraies fleurs.
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> *A la Recherche du temps perdu I,* 182

The 'gisements profonds' in the Narrator's 'mental soil' mark all the experiences that have been gathered along the two 'côtés': the idea of being 'positioned' by our past is also present in this passage ('les choses, les êtres que [les deux côtés] *m'ont fait connaître'*), as 'les fleurs qu'on me montre aujourd'hui pour la première fois' are inevitably compared to the 'vraies fleurs' he knows from his walks in Combray. While the connection between the flowers and the 'soil' metaphor is delightful, it is worth noting that in this passage, as in so many others, the Narrator explores his philosophical ideas in reference to the experience of actual physical objects, such as in this case the actual flowers that grow along the Méséglise and Guermantes ways. The prominence of these 'tangible' examples in Proust's novel and the linking of involuntary memory to the sensuous experiences prompt us to consider the subject's physical existence also in the reading process.

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[39] Davey, p. 32.

Discussing the magical 'rapport' between sensations and memories, the Narrator remarks how 'la nature' sets example for this relation, which is the sole source of 'la réalité' and which the writer must grasp in order to perform his 'tâche de traducteur' (*RTP IV,* 469). Nature, as the Narrator remarks, is in this sense the beginning of all art: 'La nature ne m'avait-elle pas mis elle-même, à ce point de vue, sur la voie de l'art, n'était-elle pas commencement d'art elle-même, elle qui ne m'avait permis de connaître, souvent longtemps après, la beauté d'une chose que dans une autre, midi à Combray que dans le bruit de ses cloches [...]?' (*RTP IV,* 468)

The memory of bodily 'appropriation' of the world around us is thus as essential for our sense of 'la réalité' as the cognitive 'mapping' of our experiences. As Paul Crowther puts it:

> The human subject is in constant state of reciprocity with a world in which it inheres. [...] In our most basic pre-reflective engagement with the world, all our sensori-motor and cognitive capacities operate inseparably as a unified field. This unity, however, does not simply happen. It is a process of growth involving bodily co-ordination and the acquisition of language on the basis of complex and continuing social interchange. [...] We become persons gradually.[40]

The way we associate abstract ideas to our 'in-the-world' experiences is here viewed as a part of an individual 'process of growth'. Following this line of thought, the Proustian 'moyen de lire en soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) can be considered as a kind of process of 'reading-in-the-world', acknowledging the role of the direct, embodied in-the-world experience on the one hand, and that of imagination and intuition on the other, in grasping (and indeed, recomposing) what we call 'reality'.

The Narrator's idea of 'embodied time' suggests that the subject can come to realise his or her unique standing point (from which an experience can be counted as his or her 'own') through the continuities of sensation between different experiences at different points in time; this is where the analogy between the past and the present is imaginatively drawn from the real experience and the sense that there is something essentially *shared* between the two. This sensation is also fundamentally characteristic

[40] Crowther, p. 153.

of reading literature, not least because of the way we learn language in the first place: through an endless mnemonic process of (personal) association of words and concepts with our experience in-the-world.

In this chapter, and in the course of this study, I have explored the Proustian notion of selfhood and reading through an approach which emphasises the processual nature of truth and self-understanding. The self-understanding gained through the aesthetic reading experience is essentially 'a process of encounter [which] resides in the continuous generation of the in-between' – the in-between which 'is no "no man's land" between isolated subjects' but rather 'the disclosive space of the hermeneutic encounter itself. It is this space which subjectivizes the participating individuals.'[41] This process of self-understanding involves acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between primary experience, imagination and mediation, as well as the role of all three in our way of shaping what we call 'reality', the world and our own selves. As Adam Watt notes, 'the reading of fiction opens our eyes to the fragility of what we take to be ontological and epistemological certainties, and destabilises the traditional distinctions between the intellectual and the empirical, between the real and the imaginary'.[42] In this sense one major aspect in which literature may alleviate the perceptual uncertainty of life is, paradoxically, that it shows us how much of what we consider as 'epistemologically' sound and unshakable is, in fact, constantly understood via our personal experience in-the-world and imagination and not just 'pure' intellect or reason.

In Proust's novel, the metaphors of body and the brain as containers of experiences – containers of time itself in fact – indicate the inseparability of the mind and the body of the Proustian subject and of how our 'spiritualité', our intellect, and our memories are never detached from the bodily experience nor from time. We travel through life as psycho-physical beings, so deeply affected by the sensuous that it becomes, in a way, the basis for our thought processes, including our imagination. Accordingly, Proust's Narrator presents literary work as able to offer us the means to read '*en* [nous]-mêmes' (*RTP IV,* 610) rather than simply reading 'nous-mêmes' full stop. The self-understanding that reading provides is thus not conceptual understanding; rather, it leads

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[41] Davey, p. 15.

[42] Watt, p. 119.

into enhanced sense – even if only temporary – of one's place in and experience in the world and of the world. As the self is continuously taking shape and evolving (or deteriorating), the subject's self-understanding and any 'knowledge' can only be accessed through a process which both opens us up for the new and unfamiliar and reveals to us, in return, the truly unique standing point from which approach it.

EPILOGUE

'Votre Grand-mère Est Perdue'

Watching the trees of Hudimesnil quiver on the horizon, the Narrator remarks how the trees seem to take a human form and in their attempt to communicate to him the secrets of his forgotten past,

> semblaient me demander de les emmener avec moi, de les rendre à la vie. Dans leur gesticulation naïve et passionnée, je reconnaissais le regret impuissant d'un être aimé qui a perdu l'usage de la parole, sent qu'il ne pourra nous dire ce qu'il veut et que nous ne savons pas deviner.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 78-79

This comparison of the trees to a beloved person who has lost the ability to speak is not merely auxiliary; as so often in Proust, it anticipates a future event in the narrative, where this very scenario takes place in the context of the grandmother's paralysis. The grandmother, affected by a serious stroke, becomes physically unable to speak and later also seems to lose her mental capacity to contribute to or even necessarily comprehend a conversation. Both of these passages emphasise the role of mediation and communication in the process of 'being oneself' and demonstrate, in their own respective ways, the manner in which the workings of the mind are inseparable from our somatic existence and our perception through the senses.

While the Hudimesnil episode focuses on the (attempted) communication with one's own self, the episode describing the grandmother's last days underscores the role of interaction with the outside world and other people in making us who we are. In this thesis I have mainly focused on the former aspect – the urge to communicate with one's own self or selves – by examining its origins as well as its different manifestations in the context of aesthetic experiences in Proust. Now, to end with, I wish to stand back and reflect briefly on what has been said by examining the passage that depicts the grandmother's loss of self and illuminates this other important dimension – interpersonal relationships – in the composition of Proustian selfhood. The Narrator's

extensive contemplation on the loss of the grandmother and Albertine, especially in *Le Temps retrouvé* when he is finally about to set to work on his book, probes into the question of to what extent the self is understood and constantly recomposed through the subject's relationships with other people and brings an ethical impetus into the Narrator's discussion about art's redemptive potential.

In *Le Côté de Guermantes II,* the Narrator's grandmother suffers a severe attack during their outing in the Champs-Elysées. The Narrator becomes aware of the seriousness of her condition from very early on, as it is he who takes her to the doctor's. After examining the grandmother, the doctor takes the Narrator to another room and without much discretion declares: "Votre grand-mère est perdue" (*RTP II,* 614). Indeed, the grandmother's state deteriorates rapidly after the attack. Up to a point she is capable of hiding the signs of her suffering through strict self-discipline and refrains from weeping and wailing whenever her daughter or grandson are in the room. As the Narrator reports, it is only when 'elle croyait que nous n'étions pas dans la chambre, elle poussait des cris: "Ah, c'est affreux!"' (*RTP II,* 619); when she notices her daughter's presence in the room, she gathers 'toute son énergie à effacer de son visage les traces de douleur' and hurries to explain that what in fact is 'affreux' is that they all should be locked up indoors on such a beautiful day.[1]

Soon the grandmother's attempts to conceal the marks of her illness become impossible, however: she first temporarily loses her eyesight and soon thereafter her hearing. The most frightful situation for the Narrator, however, is the moment when he leans to kiss her only to realise that 'elle ne m'avait pas reconnu' (*RTP II,* 630). This is the ultimate horrific proof of the fact that the illness has conquered her mind as well as her body. Here again, like the carriage in the Hudimesnil passage, life seems to be taking him 'loin de ce que je croyais seul vrai' (*RTP II,* 78) – in this case the grandmother's affection.

This passage describes beautifully the fear of a complete loss of a beloved one during a period of illness which transforms (or rather deforms) her into a complete stranger.

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[1] "Ah ! ma fille, c'est affreux, rester couchée par ce beau soleil quand on voudrait aller se promener, je pleure de rage contre vos prescriptions. […] Je n'ai pas mal." (*RTP II,* 619).

Affected by this fear, both the Narrator and his mother are desperate to hold on to the memories of the grandmother before her illness. The mother, for example, refrains from looking at the grandmother's deformed face, 'peut-être pour mieux garder plus tard intacte l'image du vrai visage de sa mère, rayonnant d'esprit et bonté' (*RTP II,* 615). For the Narrator, the most tragic loss seems to be that of verbal communication with the grandmother. After the paralysis has rendered the grandmother speechless, the role of words *in absentia* becomes accentuated: the Narrator states how his grandmother, although still physically there, has already disappeared, together with her ability to carry on conversation and fantastic allusions the way she used to. He also notes how the cruel new reality seems to make the precious moments they have spent together seem illusory and fleeting:

> Elle n'était pas morte encore. J'étais déjà seul. Et même ces allusions qu'elle avait faite aux Guermantes, à Molière, à nos conversations sur le petit noyau, prenaient un air sans appui, sans cause, fantastique, parce qu'elle sortaient du néant de ce même être qui, demain peut-être, n'existerait plus, pour lequel elles n'auraient plus aucun sens, de ce néant – incapable de les concevoir – que ma grand-mère serait bientôt.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu II,* 609

In the light of this quotation, it seems that it is the grandmother's inability to 'concevoir', to mediate, which ultimately estranges her from her beloved ones and (very likely) also from her own self. The memory of the grandmother and her witty conversation suddenly gains a new value and importance, standing in a strict contrast with the present grandmother who has become a mere 'néant' and to whom these fantastic allusions 'n'auraient plus aucun sens'.

At first, this description of the grandmother's 'slow death' seems to steer back to the Cartesian separation between the mind and the body: earlier on during her illness, the grandmother uses words as a kind of camouflage to hide the suffering of the body. Later on, even though still physically there but unable to communicate, she is considered, at least by the Narrator, as quite 'gone'. The event of her death takes place soon after, although the Narrator's true realisation of having lost her only follows much later, during his second visit to Balbec in *Sodome et Gomorrhe II*.

However, what this description of the grandmother's paralysis also shows us, almost as if through negation, is the way in which, as Crowther puts it, 'human perception is itself creative and expressive [...]. The world's transcendence – its refusal to be absolutely fixed by our body's contact with it – obliges the embodied subject to be itself transcendent: to constantly change its perceptual positioning in relation to the world.'[2] The grandmother's senses are numbed by the paralysis, which terminates her contact with the world in a much more profound sense than merely in making her unable to perform certain bodily functions; indeed, the paralyses seem to lead to a more or less total loss of self – she truly becomes 'perdue'. Thus, through this example Proust in fact strikes right at the core of the dilemma of Cartesian duality, showing us what happens when both words and sensuous perception cease to act as a bridge between the world and ourselves and how inseparably the subject and her cognitive faculties are tied to what is happening to the 'object-like' body.

Moreover, the description of the grandmother's estrangement and loss manifests the extent to which our subjectivity is intertwined with and shaped by our relationships with other people. The grandmother's gradual 'disappearance' as well as later on the death of Albertine compel the Narrator to reconsider and rearrange his experiences – and not just the experiences of his current self but, as demonstrated earlier in the context of 'les intermittences du cœur' (*RTP III,* 152-7) and the barber's visit in *Albertine disparue* (*RTP IV,* 13-5), a range of selves – past, present, recurring, habitual, forgotten. The suffering, so unbearable at first that it needs to be muted, suffocated, eventually leads to the urge to communicate and mediate. 'La souffrance', in Proust, is a part and parcel of the experience of the real, and the time that passes without its presence seems in many ways to remain almost 'unlived'.[3] As Shattuck remarks, this 'growing conviction that suffering and grief are ultimately salutary and provide a form of spiritual knowledge' (together with the theories about involuntary memory) allows Proust to

[2] Crowther, p. 104.

[3] The chronological jumps in the *Recherche* (the Narrator leaping over the years spent in the sanatorium in a single sentence, for example) seem to support this idea of how the absence 'la douleur' – or of love and relationships causing it – in many ways dilutes the experience of being alive, as well as one's experiences of art. As we see in the course of the novel, the Narrator's aesthetic experiences (as well as those of Swann) seem to be energised and deepened by the emotional upheavals caused by love, desire, jealousy and death.

'raise up out of the mind a landscape of thoughts and feelings that otherwise lies at too low a level to be seen'.[4]

The death of these two characters allows Proust to describe in detail the gradual process through which the loss of the loved ones is comprehended, and moreover, the way in which, as the Narrator points out, parts of the self die along with them. It is of course right to ask how healthy or ethically sound the way in which these relationships become accentuated is – that the Narrator only seems capable of appreciating these two women after they are dead, and how 'les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus' (*RTP IV,* 449). The fact that the Narrator seems to be incapable of having entirely succesful relationships does not however mean that he is not *affected* by other people – quite the contrary. For Proust, his neurotic protagonist offers a very fertile ground to explore such effects, as the Narrator's suppressed guilt and (to some extent self-inflicted) suffering make him speculate and reflect on his relationships endlessly inside his head.

The Narrator, finally about to set to work on his book, declares that for a writer, 'les années heureuses sont les années perdues, on attend la souffrance pour travailler' (*RTP IV,* 488). This perspective and the fact that the Narrator only seems to fully understand the significance of his relationships after the death of the other person have often been deemed to manifest a certain overemphasis of art over life in Proust – or considered, at least, as something which problematises the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the *Recherche.*[5] What some of these criticisms overlook, however, is that aesthetic processes in Proust are never completely detached from life: the emotive and sensuous undercurrent with which we create or open up a work of art, as we have seen in the examples throughout this study, is dependent on our life experience and a kind of precondition for a genuine aesthetic experience. As the Narrator notes, 'l'imagination [et] la pensée' – the two domains through which we appropriate a work of art (and

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[4] Shattuck, *Proust's Way,* p. 139.

[5] For example Bailey views Proust's Narrator's aesthetic emphases as overriding his moral and social obligations. (For discussion and my response to Bailey, see Chapter Five, pp. 168-70.) Some more openminded interpretations of he problematic relationship between aesthetics and ethics in Proust can be found for example in Malcolm Bowie's 'The morality of Proust', his inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford 25 November 1993 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); in David Ellison's *A Reader's Guide to In Search of Lost Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 44-46, 153; and in Rosa Slegers's recent book *Courageous Vulnerability: Ethics and Knowledge in Proust, Bergson, Marcel, and James* (Leiden; Brill; Biggleswade: Extenza Turpin, 2010), esp. pp. 8, 57-68, 218 (and elsewhere).

which are required in creating one) – 'peuvent être des machines admirables en soi', but it is '[l]a souffrance' which ultimately 'les met en marche' (*RTP IV,* 487).

In a way in these statements make the idea that art somehow 'redeems' what has been missed, lost or destroyed in life seem like a logical impossibility. The Narrator remarks that 'les chagrins sont [...] des serviteurs atroces, *impossibles à remplacer* et qui par des voies souterraines nous mènent à la vérité et à la mort' (*RTP IV,* 488, my emphasis). The Narrator's standpoint here is quite clear: without these feelings, we would remain incapable of emotive responses in a very basic sense – remain handicapped, as it were, in any situation that requires intuition and sensibility, including aesthetic experiences.

But there is more: the fact that these sorrows are *irreplaceable* suggests that they are indeed something highly personal and preciously unique. Therefore, when our encounter with a work of art reawakens these emotions, the aesthetic experience may take us straight down to the 'riche bassin minier' (*RTP IV,* 614) of our 'sol mental' (*RTP I,* 182), enabling us to understand something about the way we are in the world, how we are affected by it and how we respond to it. This proposition also allows us to consider aesthetic experience as something more than a mere instrument for 'reading the self' full stop; once again, the germ of the Proustian 'moyen de lire en soi-même' (*RTP IV,* 610) is not *what* we read but *how* we read, and the Narrator's expression 'lire *en* eux-mêmes' reminds us of the idea of subjectivity as a space within which the people in our lives and those relationships which shape us emotively are also always present.

Secondly, it is not suggested by the Narrator that art, even if it may deepen and illuminate our life experiences in a very special way, would make us somehow less vulnerable in life (or in the face of death). At the end of the *Le Temps retrouvé,* the Narrator elaborates on the limits of the body in which the years have been 'contained':

> Il fallait partir en effet de ceci que j'avais un corps, c'est-à-dire que j'étais perpétuellement menacé d'un double danger, extérieur, intérieur. Encore ne parlais-je ainsi que pour la commodité du langage. Car le danger intérieur, comme celui d'hémorragie cérébrale, est extérieur aussi, étant du corps. Et avoir un corps, c'est la grande menace pour l'esprit.
>
> *A la Recherche du temps perdu IV,* 612-13

This double danger reminds him also of some moments during his life where vivid intellectual activity has taken place with a complete suspension of physical activity – such as leaving the restaurant in Rivebelle inebriated – noting how in these moments, he was able to 'sentir très nettement en moi l'objet présent de ma pensée, et de comprendre qu'il dépendait d'un hasard non seulement que cet objet n'y fût pas encore entré, mais qu'il fût, avec mon corps même, anéanti' (*RTP IV,* 613). Faced with his realisation of 'cette dimension énorme que je ne savais pas avoir,' the Narrator describes his feelings in bodily terms: 'J'avais *le vertige* de voir au-dessous de moi et en moi pourtant, comme si j'avais des lieues de hauteur, tant d'années' (*RTP IV,* 624, my emphasis).[6] Having discovered that his vocation lies in 'l'approfondissement d'impressions qu'il fallait d'abord recréer par la mémoire' (*RTP IV,* 612), he now needs to overcome his vertigo and dive in – before it is too late.

In this study I have considered the nature of Proustian subjectivity primarily by examining the subject's interaction with the phenomenologically perceptible world, art, and the ways of communicating with one's own self/selves. The grandmother's struggle and the effects of the disease on her mind and personality also emphasise the inseparability of physical and mental dimensions of the self and how in the Proustian world, imagination and thought are tied to the 'direct' experience – or the lack of it. Aesthetic, artful, creative and imaginative processes in Proust do not belong to the realm of art alone, but feature as an essential element in the appropriation of the most basic immediate experiences and in all human understanding. The description of the paralysis and the slow death of the grandmother furthermore illustrates the extent to which selfhood is affected and comprehended through our relationships with other people. In drawing all these different twines of 'being oneself' together, the grandmother's 'disappearance' creates the optimal conditions for Proust to explore the inseparability of emotions, memory, sensuous experience, imagination, and mediation, and the crucial role of all of these elements in the process of making us who we are, in making us unique individuals – 'dans le Temps' (*RTP IV,* 625).

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[6] Richard E. Goodkin explores this metaphor in a wonderful analysis of Proust's novel and Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958). See Goodkin, *Around Proust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), Chapter Four 'Proust's Vertigo and Hitchcock's *Vertigo'* pp. 89-102.

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